

SACRED SUBJECTS: GENDER AND NATION IN SOUTH ASIAN FICTION

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Krupa Kirit Shandilya

August 2009

© 2009 Krupa Kirit Shandilya

## SACRED SUBJECTS: GENDER AND NATION IN SOUTH ASIAN FICTION

Krupa Kirit Shandilya, Ph. D.

Cornell University 2009

My dissertation, *Sacred Subjects: Gender and Nation in South Asian Literature*, intervenes in the ongoing debates in postcolonial and feminist studies about the mapping of woman onto nation. There has been a tendency to read the land as female in both colonial and postcolonial discourse. As feminist scholars like Anne McClintock have shown, such a mapping places the burden of representing the nation onto the gendered subject. My dissertation argues that fiction in Bengali, Urdu and English undoes this mapping by creating non-normative gendered figures implicated in the sacred, who counteract the paternalistic figurations of gender present in imperialist and nationalist discourse.

My introductory chapter argues that the non-normative gendered figures of this fiction have been repressed by the nation-state in order to create a homogenous entity called the “nation.” My second chapter argues that late-nineteenth century Bengali domestic fiction, namely Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s *Krishnakanta’s Will* and *The Poison Tree*, Rabindranath Tagore’s *Chokher Bali* and Saratchandra Chatterjee’s *Charitraheen* and *Srikanta*, challenges the notion of the exploited Hindu widow who needs to be rescued from her plight, by creating the widow as an empowered character who usurps wifely devotion or *satita*, implicated in Hindu devotional practices, to create a space for herself within her society. My third chapter analyzes the Urdu novel, namely Mohammed Hadi Ruswa’s *Umrao Jan Ada* and Premchand’s *Sevasadan* and argues that the courtesans of these novels usurp modesty and service, borne from

Islamic and Hindu codes of conduct for veiled women, to re-instate themselves within respectable society. My fourth chapter continues these analyses to consider a contemporary novel, Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, which destabilizes the gendering of the nation by rewriting the passive, religious, feminine, Indian nation of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* as a heterogeneous, complicated space that defies narrativization. My final chapter reflects on the discourse of liberal secularism and argues that it subsumes the agency of subjects implicated in the sacred.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Krupa Shandilya has a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai and the University of Rochester. Her interests are feminist theory, postcolonial theory and South Asian literature.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee whose support and guidance made this dissertation possible; Liz Deloughrey, who patiently read draft after draft of my dissertation and has been both a mentor and a friend to me; Durba Ghosh, whose encouragement and faith in me enabled me to push on when the going was tough; Biodun Jeyifo, for his detailed comments and feedback on my work. I would also like to thank my family for their support, especially *ben* whose unconditional love has always held me afloat. In addition, I would also like to thank my dear friends who have stood by me through this long and arduous process. Jay, for sharing my passion in books from the age of ten, Karan, for setting me on this path, Mikey, for his gentle kindness and unconditional affection, Namu, for making me laugh away the blues, Mukti, for holding my hand (metaphorically and literally) through the cold Ithaca winters, Sowm, for dragging me out of the library for necessary tea breaks and gossip sessions, Shital, for her intellectual companionship and emotional support, Bilal, for making Ithaca home for me, Hamza, for his intellectual and emotional nourishment and his love and faith in me and Taimoor, who has been my pillar of strength.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Chapter 1: Gender, Nation, Translation and the Sacred: Towards a Methodology for Comparative Literature	1
Chapter 2: Between Home and the World: Devotion and the Widow in Late Nineteenth-Early Twentieth Century Bengali fiction	28
Chapter 3: Inside <i>Purdah</i> / Outside <i>Purdah</i> : The Veil and the Courtesan in Mirza Ruswa's <i>Umrao Jan Ada</i> and Premchand's <i>Sevasadan</i>	69
Chapter 4: The Sacred and the Secular: Spirituality, Aesthetics and Politics in Rudyard Kipling's <i>Kim</i> and Vikram Chandra's <i>Sacred Games</i>	118
Chapter 5: Sacred Subjects: Writing the Sacred in the Secular State	154

Gender, Nation, Translation and the Sacred:  
Towards a Methodology for Comparative Literature

On one of my forays in Cornell's Kroch Library, I chanced upon Rabindranath Tagore's *Nashtanir* [The Broken Nest] (1901), a short novella about a young woman, Charulata, confined in a stifling marriage to an older man. As I was gripped in this heartbreaking tale of passion and unfulfilled desire, it suddenly dawned on me that here was a woman whose desires did not seem to fit into any nationalist or imperialist theorization of the nation. In my class on Indian historiography, I had recently read Partha Chatterjee's theory that the late-nineteenth century Bengali woman was configured as "spiritual" by the Bengali nationalist movement, and that women who did not fit into this framework were cast as Anglicized. Charulata's frustrated sexual passion was far from spiritual, and her burning desire to break free of her marriage could not be framed as a proto-feminist attempt at "modernity" either. How, then, did Charulata's story fit into the narrative of the nation?

In the years that followed, this question continued to haunt me. This project is an attempt to answer this question through a broader framework: how does the nation account for the gendered subject whose narrative does not fit within nationalist or imperialist accounts of the nation? In the process of trying to answer this question, I came across literary texts in both Bengali and Urdu, which told stories of women whose lives were deeply implicated in the sacred and were therefore never heard in imperialist or nationalist discourse. I came to realize then, that contemporary theoretical understandings of the South Asian nation had been formulated largely through "secular"<sup>1</sup> readings of texts in English<sup>2</sup> or through "canonical"<sup>3</sup> texts in other

---

<sup>1</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Habitations of Modernity*. In *Habitations of Modernity*, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that there "are parts of society that remain opaque to the theoretical gaze of the modern analyst" (Chakrabarty 45) because the modern analyst is confined to thinking through "secular" systems of knowledge, which occlude alternative modes of being that are implicated in the "sacred."

South Asian languages.

In *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Spivak calls for a “new comparative literature” (18) that will embrace languages outside of the Euro-American tradition and pay close attention to the textures and histories of words that get obliterated in translations. As Spivak argues in her introduction, work on literatures in South Asian languages other than English has emerged primarily from Area Studies departments, while English departments have focused primarily on Anglophone literature of the colonial/postcolonial period. Taking my cue from Spivak, I explore articulations of gender in Bengali and Urdu literature of the late-nineteenth early twentieth century and argue that a study of these texts destabilizes contemporaneous theoretical mappings of gender with nation. I juxtapose my analyses of these texts with a study of two texts from the English literary tradition to suggest that the English literary tradition destabilizes the gendering of the nation as feminine thereby offering a wholly different frame through which we can understand the mapping of gender onto nation. This dissertation is thus committed to the task of destabilizing notions of the nation by recovering marginalized articulations of gender in literary texts in Bengali, Urdu and English as they are implicated in notions of the sacred.

As anthropologist Talal Asad argues in *Formations of the Secular* the secular has come to be associated with the exertion of liberal, humanist agency and the sacred

---

<sup>2</sup> While there have been a slew of books on Indian writing, I will gesture to two books that are exemplary of the trend to focus primarily on Indian writing in English, namely, Sara Suleri’s *The Rhetoric of English India* (1992) and Meenakshi Mukherjee’s *The Perishable Empire* (2000). In her book, Suleri examines the way in which colonial and postcolonial writers writing in English, such as E.M. Forster, Rudyard Kipling, V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, have explored their experiences of India. On the other hand, Mukherjee’s book does examine vernacular traditions, but only insofar as they relate to English language texts of the same period. Neither writer thinks about vernacular traditions as worth examining in and of itself, and therefore the understanding of the nation that these scholarly texts produce is necessarily limited to a very specific cultural formulation.

<sup>3</sup> While Bankimchandra’s Bengali masterpiece, *Anandamath* (1882), a fictional depiction of the Sanyasi rebellion was read and theorized as the nascent voice of Indian nationalism, Bankimchandra’s domestic fiction fell by the way side. Similarly, Partition narratives in Urdu were read in the context of the nation-state’s rupture, and Urdu novels that focused on the problems of North Indian society were relatively neglected.

with coercion. This understanding has become so hegemonic that it has become impossible to understand the notion of agency outside the framework of the secular. Asad urges us to look beyond this frame and suggests that we should not assume “that a proper understanding of agency requires us to place it within the framework of a secular history of freedom from all coercive control” (Asad 72-73) since there are expressions of agency that stem from the sacred, which do not map onto this framework. In the context of this project I ask: How does the sacred inform the subaltern subject’s desire for self-realization and what implications does this self-realization through the sacred have for the politics of the nation-state? In what follows, I will explicate this project’s engagement with feminist and postcolonial theories of gender and nation and put them in conversation with epistemologies of the sacred. I will also outline this project’s commitment to expanding the notion of comparative literature to include texts in non-Western languages.

## I

### Theorizing Gender and the Nation

Frederic Jameson’s essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” argues that literature produced in the former colonies is necessarily political and can therefore be read as an allegory for the nation. In his book *In Theory: classes, nations, literatures* Aijaz Ahmad contests Jameson’s claim by studying a collection of Urdu short stories, which although written at a time of great social upheaval make no reference to the nation. Through this study, Ahmad suggests that non-political subjects also made their way into fiction. Parallel to this, feminists have also theorized the ways in which the figure of “woman” has been transformed into an allegory for the nation.

One of the earliest studies on this subject is Nira Yuval-Davis’ polemical work

*Gender and Nation*, in which she identifies five major ways in which women have been implicated in nationalism: as biological reproducers of the members of national collectivities and concomitantly as reproducers of national boundaries; as transmitters of national culture; as symbolic signifiers of national difference and finally as participants in nationalist movements. Davis' theory has led to many productive engagements with the ways in which the figure of "woman" has been co-opted for nationalist projects.<sup>4</sup>

Building upon the work of Davis, Anne McClintock<sup>5</sup> suggests that nationalism is premised on primarily male desires, and that the construction of the nation rests on a notion of gender difference:

Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary, principle of discontinuity (McClintock 92).

McClintock suggests that this dichotomy has elided women from the narrative of the nation because their agency is subsumed within the larger nationalist framework. Thus, although many women participated in the African National Congress, Franz Fanon's narrative of Algeria's nationalist struggle sees them as mere appendages to male nationalist efforts. McClintock suggests that women's participation in the nationalist struggle should be considered as stemming from their own desire for nationalism and not merely as an afterthought of male nationalist sentiments.

---

<sup>4</sup> Their theory continues to have relevance for understandings of gender and nation within different national spaces. Jill Didur's *Unsettling Partition: literature, gender, memory* (2006) offers an analysis of the ways in which the figure of woman was used during the Partition of India to reinstate national boundaries.

<sup>5</sup> See Anne McClintock's "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race and Nationalism."

In the South Asian context, Partha Chatterjee's theorization of the nation in *The Nation and its Fragments* has become paradigmatic for ways of thinking about gender and nation across disciplinary boundaries. Much like McClintock's analysis of the role of the figure of woman in the nationalist project, Chatterjee's theory too suggests that nationalism was founded on gender difference. Chatterjee contends that the Bengali middle-class divided the world into a material "outer" world, dominated by *bhadralok* men, which was open to Western influences and a spiritual "inner" world, comprising primarily of the *bhadramahila* [upper caste, middle class, Bengali woman], which was the true expression of the self and a repository of "national culture" (Chatterjee 9). In this theorization, the *bhadramahila* was cast as the *kulalakshmi* [goddess of the household] who represented the home and thus "the home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture...No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essential spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues" (Chatterjee 126). This enabled the Bengali nationalist elite, emasculated by colonialism in the outer sphere, to exercise unquestioned authority within the inner sphere.<sup>6</sup>

Chatterjee's highly specific theorization of gender and nation in the context of the nationalist movement in Bengal has become central to analyses of gender and nation across disciplinary boundaries,<sup>7</sup> such as history, literary criticism and

---

<sup>6</sup> See Mahua Sarkar's *Visible histories, disappearing women: producing Muslim womanhood in late colonial Bengal* in which she analyzes Chatterjee's theorization and suggests that nationalists invoked the "women's question" as Chatterjee calls it, to assert their manliness: "For all their differences, both the reformers and the Hindu revivalists, much like the British, were invoking the woman question as a means first of establishing their adequate manliness—defined, presumably, by the degree to which they could control or co-opt women within the family—and then of asserting and justifying their respective claims to or desire for political power" (Sarkar 53).

<sup>7</sup> See Niranjana, Tejaswani. "Left to the Imagination: Indian Nationalisms and Female Sexuality in Trinidad" *Public Culture* 11.1 (1999) 223-243. In this essay Niranjana grapples with Chatterjee's formulation of the inner and outer sphere in the context of Caribbean national identity. Similarly, in *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* Mahua Sarkar re-instates Chatterjee's theory by suggesting that "For all their differences, both the reformers and the Hindu revivalists, much like the British, were invoking the woman question as a means first of establishing their adequate manliness—defined, presumably, by the degree to which they

anthropology, which nuance Chatterjee's theory but retain the central thrust of his argument. Thus, historian and feminist scholar Tanika Sarkar takes the case of widows who live at the periphery of the Bengali nation and argues that the widow's strict observance of rituals roots her "body in ancient India, thus miraculously enabling her to escape foreign domination. The cloth she wears is necessarily indigenous...Ergo, the nation needs ascetic widowhood" (Sarkar 42).<sup>8</sup> Sarkar's insistence on the widow's "asceticism" excludes the widow's sexuality, and suggests therefore that the figure of the widow reinforces the dichotomy between the inner spiritual and outer material world. Similarly, in her analysis of gender and nation in the South Asian novel, Sangeeta Ray explores constructions of gender and nation through a number of late-nineteenth-early twentieth century fiction, both Indian and Victorian, to suggest the multitudinous ways in which the gendered subject is usurped for the nationalist project. In one of her chapters, she studies Chatterjee's mapping of woman with nation in the context of novelists who grapple with this representation (Rabindranath Tagore) and others who reject it outright (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein) in their fiction.

Anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran contests Chatterjee's theorization of women, which she argues is based on a colonial centric view of women's agency: "Colonial attitudes toward nationalist women depicted them as beings dependent upon their husband's agency, and this idea of the 'dependent subject' was replicated in the way nationalist ideology rendered women as domestic(ated), and not political subjects" (Visweswaran 86). She suggests instead, that although nationalist ideology and subsequently theories of nationalism, depict women as "domestic(ated)" subjects, women were indeed active participants in the nationalist movement. Through a close study of women's participation in the nationalist movement in the Madras Presidency,

---

could control or co-opt women within the family—and then of asserting and justifying their respective claims to or desire for political power" (Sarkar 53).

<sup>8</sup> See Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c2001.

she suggests that women were the subjects rather than the objects of nationalist discourse.

In all these theorizations of the nation, however, the figure of woman remains an allegory for the nation. The woman is either the object of nationalist discourse (i.e. the land as mother) or the subject of nationalist discourse (women as participants in nationalism). However, the female characters of the Bengali and Urdu novels that I examine represent the anxieties about the changing social role of women within *bhadralok* and *sharif* society respectively. Since they become the focal points for all that is wrong with these societies, they cannot be made into allegories for the nation. Yet, these female characters cannot be jettisoned into an alienating otherness against which nationalists and imperialists can frame the nation because they operate within societal norms even as they exist outside of them. In what follows, I suggest that the narratives of gendered subjects who exist at the margins of the nation destabilize the mapping of woman onto nation because they are subaltern subjects who are implicated in the sacred.

### The Subaltern and the Sacred

In *Habitations of Modernity*, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that by definition the subaltern is one who cannot think the state,<sup>9</sup> and therefore “[Since the subaltern] cannot, dream the whole called *the state* and must, therefore, be suggestive of knowledge forms that are not tied to the will that produces the state” (Chakrabarty 34). However, readings of subaltern subjectivity have been framed largely through the context of the state. While these readings have produced evocative accounts of subaltern agency, which has been elided by state accounts, by situating subaltern

---

<sup>9</sup> In *Habitations of Modernity*, Chakrabarty explicates Gramsci’s theory of subalternity: “For Antonio Gramsci, readers will recall, subaltern named a political position by the revolutionary intellectual. Once the subaltern could imagine/think the state, he transcended, theoretically speaking, the condition of subalternity” (Chakrabarty 34).

agency in the context of the state they have elided accounts of subaltern agency that occur from “knowledge forms” that exist outside the compulsions of the liberal secular state.

In her essay, “Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and Its Historiography” Kamala Visweswaran recuperates the voices of lower class, lower caste women who participate in the nationalist struggle, but whose contributions were not considered notable by either imperialist or nationalist discourse. Since Visweswaran’s project is interested in retrieving subaltern agency from a nationalist framework it must necessarily engage with the contours of liberal, secular, nationalism.<sup>10</sup> Therefore when Visweswaran speaks of retrieving subaltern agency it is through a humanist discourse which connotes rights as indicators of agency: “[to recuperate the subaltern subject is necessarily to] invest it with rights and duties, but also to make it do the work of its authorizing project. The demonstration that subaltern women speak, then, is an act this analysis strains against, but which is inevitable given the terms of subject retrieval deployed in a nationalist field” (Visweswaran 91). Given the nationalist framework of Visweswaran’s argument, her analysis necessarily adopts the liberal, secular discourse of the state, in which “rights” are equated with agency.

In *Formations of the Secular*, anthropologist Talal Asad argues that in liberal humanist discourse the secular is associated with the exertion of agency and the sacred with coercion. This understanding has become so hegemonic that it has become impossible to understand the notion of agency outside the framework of the secular. Asad urges us to look beyond this frame and suggests that we should not assume “that

---

<sup>10</sup> The Nehruvian vision of the subcontinent followed the avowedly “secularist” policy of the Indian National Congress to differentiate itself from the “sectarianist” policy that had led to the formation of Pakistan. As Chakrabarty argues, the constitution makers of India “accepted the need for a separation of religious and political institutions” (Chakrabarty 22) for without this it would be impossible to contain the heterogeneity of the subcontinent.

a proper understanding of agency requires us to place it within the framework of a secular history of freedom from all coercive control” (Asad 72-73) since there are expressions of agency that stem from the sacred, which do not map onto this framework. However, the biases of secular humanism seep even into narratives which are concerned with the recovering narratives of subaltern subjects who are implicated in the sacred. Thus when Ania Loomba urges feminists to construct readings around the subjectivity of the *sati* as a female, subaltern subject she does not however suggest that the *sati*'s desire for self-immolation could stem from a desire for devotion.<sup>11</sup> Hence, although Loomba suggests that the *sati*'s narrative is subsumed by the imperial/national project, her own analysis does not account for devotion, which is a “knowledge form” that stands outside the liberal, secular will that produces the state.

However, what of the subaltern subject who stands outside of narratives of the nation? Do we still read her as implicated in the liberal, secular, humanist understanding of agency? In her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak undertakes a close reading of the suicide of a young woman, Bhuvaneshwari, whose narrative remains beyond the purview of the state. Spivak adduces that Bhuvaneshwari's voice, i.e. the reason for her suicide, has been lost forever because it has been subsumed within a narrative of patriarchal nationalism: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third world woman” caught between tradition and modernization” (Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak” 306). In Spivak's analysis, Bhuvaneshwari's discourse is subsumed by patriarchy, imperialism and nationalism, which constitute her subjectivity for their own purpose. To this triad, I would like to

---

<sup>11</sup> For more details on this see Ania Loomba's “Dead women tell no tales: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and Post-Colonial Writings on Window Immolation in India.”

suggest a fourth member, which also works to subsume the voice of the subaltern woman within its theoretical framework: secular, liberal, humanism. In other words, both Visweswaran and Spivak suggest that the act of speech is concomitant with agency. I suggest that outside of a liberal, secular, humanist framework, silence (the opposite of speech) may not necessarily be concomitant with disempowerment.<sup>12</sup> The task of retrieving subaltern subjectivity, then, may not be one of recovering speech but of reading silences.

This project therefore deliberately undertakes the task of reading subaltern subjectivity through texts, which are not produced by subaltern women. Although of course there are novels and memoirs written by women from the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, this project is interested in examining the particular ways that elite male writers, the “dominant consciousness” of the nation, write the narratives of the gendered subaltern woman. Gayatri Spivak argues that the subaltern subject, by definition, can never have access to re-presentation because it is always subject to “the cathexis of the elite, that it is never fully recoverable, that is always askew from its received signifiers, indeed that it is effaced even as it is disclosed, that it is reducibly discursive” (Spivak “Deconstructing Historiography” 203). In other words, because subaltern consciousness is co-opted by elite discourse, it must be read through “strategic essentialisms,” by which the categories elite and subaltern become fixed essences that can be defined and understood as such.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> In “Small Speeches,” Visweswaran suggests liberal humanism construes of speech as agency, which “invokes the idea of self-originating presence, so that conversely, lack of speech is seen as absence” (Visweswaran 91).

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in this project I acknowledge that the subaltern consciousness of is subject to the “cathexis” of the elite male writers who write her as a fictional character. In his study of the tenth-century Kashmiri historian Kalhana, Ranajit Guha explicates the nature of the “cathexis” that occurs in the writing of historiography. He suggests that Kalhana’s historiography is necessarily contaminated by feudalism, which “was branded on the body of the dominant consciousness itself, historiography, unable to jump out of its skin, was forced to work from within the ruling culture” (Guha 219). This visceral metaphor encapsulates the bounded nature of human narrative. Since historiography cannot “jump out of its skin” to critically interrogate its formation of “history,” a writer too is implicated in the “dominant consciousness” of the “ruling culture” within which he writes.

Since narrative is by its very nature branded by the mark of the “dominant consciousness,” (non) articulations of gendered subaltern agency can be recovered by closely examining the ways in which the “dominant consciousness” brands itself on the subaltern subject. This project is invested in the productive tensions that emerge from this interaction, while at the same time remaining acutely aware of the ideological formations that underlie these textual productions of female subaltern consciousness. In this task there is neither desire for, nor assumption of, an “unadulterated” gendered subaltern consciousness that exists outside of the text, but rather a careful un-raveling of this from within the site of its production.

#### Thinking through translation

In keeping with this project’s focus on the delicate process of retrieving subaltern subjectivity, I forward a mode of reading that is acutely aware of the fragility of this enterprise. As this project is in English, but deals with texts in Bengali and Urdu, the process of reading is also a process of translation. In her essay on Cixous’ poetics of translation, Rosemary Arrojo describes the act of translation as an act of reading:

[R]eading is viewed as an act of listening to the text’s otherness. As a consequence if the text as other is not to be mastered but listened to, contemporary theories of reading which emphasize the reader’s productive authorial role are ‘resisted’ and leave room for the ‘adoption of a state of active receptivity’ in which the reader tries to hear what the text is ‘consciously and unconsciously saying’ (Sellers 1988, p 7 quoted in Arrojo 147).

This process of translation, then is an act of reading, in which the translator remains acutely aware of the nuances of the text, so that she never subsumes the text’s “otherness” within the hegemonic registers of English. To this end I forward a

methodology of translation, which uses the cinematic technique of “deep focus,” to undertake the task of careful reading. The term “deep focus” when used in cinema is defined as “A use of the camera lens and lighting that keeps both the close and distant objects being photographed in sharp focus.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, deep focus is a camera technique which affords great depth because it simultaneously keeps in view both close and distant spatial planes. In this paper, I extend the notion of “deep focus” to include the linguistic planes of a literary tradition.

In keeping with this analogy, the close linguistic plane of “deep focus” maps onto the notion of translation as an effort to “restate (words) from one language into another language,” keeping as close to the meaning of the original as possible. In other words, when reading literary texts in Bengali and Hindi/Urdu, I translate words, sentences, paragraphs from Bengali/Urdu/Hindi into English to make comprehensible a literary fabric to the English reader. As Gayatri Spivak argues, the task of translation is primarily a task of reading for the translator must become an “intimate reader” of the text, and must allow herself to “surrender” to it for it is only then that she can “respond to the special call of the text” (Spivak “The Politics of Translation” 372).<sup>15</sup> Thus, the task of the translator is to explicate the literary nuances of the text through close reading and subsequently faithful translation. However, surrendering to a literary text involves understanding not only the meanings of words but also understanding the cultural and historical milieu in which the text is embedded. Therefore, the task of the translator involves translating not only a language but also a culture because as A.K. Ramanujan argues “even as a translator carries over a particular text from one culture into another, he has to translate the reader from the second culture into the first one” (Dharwadker 121). Thus, Ramanujan’s own

---

<sup>14</sup> See Film Noir Studies <<http://www.filmnoirstudies.com/glossary/index.asp>>

<sup>15</sup> See Gayatri Spivak’s “The Politics of Translation” for more details on this.

translations come equipped with glossaries and footnotes that situate the text in a specific cultural milieu and historical moment.

The distant linguistic plane of this methodology uses the notion of “translation” as a critical framework through which to read these literary texts. Since the literary critic is simultaneously the translator and reader of the text she must be attuned not only to the literary language and cultural nuances of the text, but also to a mode of reading beckoned by the text. Since the methodology used to study literature in the academy has been created largely through an extended engagement with literary texts in English, it is necessarily informed by its imbrication in the structure and semantics of English as a language of literature. While the skills I have learnt as a student of English literature such as close reading, critical analyses of tropes, metaphors, and attention to form will no doubt inform my readings of these texts, as reader-translator-critic, I will remain vigilant of the tendency to erase the alterity of these texts by subsuming them within the critical apparatus used to study English literature.

In this project, I theorize my readings of these texts as informed by the poetics of “translation” as it is understood in different South Asian literary traditions. As Sujit Mukherjee suggests, the term “translation” does not exist in any South Asian language, but each linguistic tradition has a different word for the notion:

Quite significantly, we don't have a word in and Indian language that would be the equivalent of the word 'translation.' We borrowed *anuvad* from Sanskrit (where it means 'speaking after') and *tarjuma* from Arabic (where it is nearer to 'explicate' or 'paraphrase')...That we don't have a widely accepted Indian word for 'translation' suggests that the concept itself was not familiar to us. Instead, when we admired a literary text in one language, we used it as a take off-point and composed a similar text in another language” (S Mukherjee

*Translation as Recovery* 45).

The South Asian notion of “translation” is a fluid one, and its definition differs in different literary traditions. Taking this as its starting point, this project examines the way in which three disparate South Asian literary cultures, namely those of Bengali, Urdu and English play with the many meanings of “translation” extant within their respective literary traditions.

## II

In what follows, I outline each chapter of my dissertation. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 are explicitly concerned with late-nineteenth-early twentieth century literary texts (in Bengali and Urdu, respectively) that are responding to regional social reform movements launched by the Indian elite to address the “women’s question.” From examining the marginalized female subject’s articulation of agency through sacred epistemologies, in Chapter 4 I turn to examining the feminization of the nation in English colonial fiction and its deconstruction by a contemporary English-language postcolonial novel, thus bringing the concerns of this dissertation to the present.

In Chapter 2 I focus on the figure of the marginalized figure of the widow in late-nineteenth-early twentieth century Bengali fiction. In Bengal, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 caused a major upheaval in *bhadralok* [upper caste, middle class] society as widows [*bidhobas*] who were traditionally cast upon the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands could now remarry. However, *bhadralok* society did not look favorably upon widow remarriage and thus many young widows were compelled to lead lives of abstinence. The *bhadralok* intelligentsia turned to the novel as a space through which they could engage with the figure of the widow. Through my close reading of the novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and

Saratchandra Chatterjee,<sup>16</sup> I argue that far from being passive objects waiting to be rescued by colonial modernity or by nationalist chauvinism, the widows of these novels are depicted as active agents of their own destiny. The widows define themselves not in terms of a westernized modernity, but rather within and against the norms of traditional *bhadralok* society by exercising *satita* or a spiritual-sexual devotion to a man other than their deceased husband. I suggest that the widow's desire for *satita* or wifely devotion is informed by the Hindu religious tradition of *bhakti* or spiritual devotion.

The term *bhakti* can be defined as “a passionate devotion of one's whole self in complete surrender to the Lord, a total way of life that is not one way among many but the only way to true salvation” (Hopkins 7), and it is used to describe Hindu performances of devotion. More specifically, I suggest that the widow's *satita* is based on the model of *bhakti* performed by the fifteenth century itinerant saint Mirabai.<sup>17</sup> Born a Rajput princess, Mirabai was married to a neighboring Rajput prince to reaffirm political alliances. Legend has it that Mirabai refused to consummate her marriage with her husband because she considered herself married to Lord Krishna. With the death of her husband she refused to observe any of the practices of widowhood incumbent on a Rajput princess and instead took to roaming the streets singing of her love for Krishna, which she framed in intensely sexual terms. Mira's devotion or *bhakti* to Krishna was later enfolded within the *Vaishnava*<sup>18</sup> tradition of Krishna *bhakti* that was founded in Bengal by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu,<sup>19</sup> and Mirabai

---

<sup>16</sup> Henceforth I will refer to these Bengali writers by their first name as is customary in the Bengali literary tradition.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed history of Mirabai's life see Kumkum Sangari's. “Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of *Bhakti*.”

<sup>18</sup> As Sangari argues in her essay on Mirabai “Though Rajasthan has a significant poetic tradition centred on the heroic courtly Krishna (e.g., Prithvi Rathaur's Veil of Krishna Rukmini), broadly speaking, the emotional contours of [Mira's] *bhakti* are closer to Chaitanya's Gaudiya *Vaishnava* school in Bengal” (Sangari 1470).

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis of the *bhakti* movement in Bengal see Edward Dimock's “Doctrine and Practice among Vaisnavas of Bengal.”

was seen as the exemplary *Vaishnavi* or devotee of Krishna. In the *bhadralok* fiction I examine, this correspondence between Mirabai and the widow is reflected both in the sexual-spiritual nature of the widow's *satita* and in the social ostracism that the widow characters face on account of their sexual-spiritual devotion.

My reading of this fiction is also influenced by the poetics of Bengali literature at this historical moment. I suggest that this Bengali fiction is marked by “*anuvad*” or a “speaking after” as each subsequent generation rewrites the plotlines and literary tropes of its literary predecessor. In the English literary tradition, the rewriting of plotlines and tropes has been theorized by Harold Bloom as occurring because the writer is plagued by a persistent anxiety: “The largest truth of literary influence is that it is an irresistible anxiety: Shakespeare will not allow you to bury him, or escape him, or replace him” (Bloom xvii). Bloom further theorizes that this “anxiety” compels the writer to oust his literary predecessor, who acts as the father figure of this Oedipal drama, in an effort to make the literary enterprise his own. While feminist critics have faulted Bloom for deploying a largely masculine ethos in describing the creative process, here I argue that Bloom's theory does not necessarily hold true for the creative process in Bengali literature, primarily because the Oedipal drama does not unfold in the same way in *bhadralok* society which structures familial relations rather differently than the nuclear family structure presupposed by Bloom's theory.

From within the context of the Bengali literary tradition, the notion of writing as rewriting was a very common phenomenon and an accepted mode of literary production. *Bhasha* [modern Indian language] literature was composed largely by its “translation” or rather transcreation of Sanskrit literature, such that “enough of the original remained in the new texts for listeners—later readers—to be able to relate it, if they wanted, to the old texts” (S Mukherjee *Translation as Discovery* 45), but the texts were nevertheless literary creations in their own right. The Bengali writers I

examine were well-versed with the Sanskrit and *bhasha* literary tradition. Bankimchandra, for instance, was educated in traditional Vedic scriptures and literature at a very young age, while Rabindranath freely utilized Rasa theory, developed by the tenth-century poet Abhivanagupta to explain the poetics of Sanskrit literature, to theorize the creative process. Saratchandra was also a deep reader of Sanskrit literature, for his novella *Parineeta* is loosely based on Kalidasa's Sanskrit epic poem *Shakuntala*. It could therefore be inferred that the literary rewriting of these writers, their recreation of themes, was a desire to emulate models of creativity put forth by *bhasha* literature's engagement with Sanskrit literature.

G.N. Devy notes in his study of Indian literary theory, which he contends is shaped around *bhasha* literature's rewriting of the Sanskrit literary canon:

Elements of plot, stories, characters, can be used again and again by new generations of writers because Indian literary theory does not lay undue emphasis on originality....The true test is the writer's capacity to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original" (Devy 187).

Therefore rewriting was not seen as imitation, a desire to replace by complete absorption, but a desire for creating art by working to perfection a motif already present, and in doing so to "revitalize the original." In his essays on literature and literary creation, Rabindranath makes this notion of revivification through imitation explicit: "Throughout human society, the thoughts of one mind strive to find fulfillment in another, thereby so shaping our ideas that they are no longer exclusive to the original thinker" (Tagore "Literary Creation" 152). Thus, Bankimchandra's reflection on the condition of widows in *Bish Briksha* and *Krishnakanter Uill* was taken up in *Chokher Bali* by Rabindranath whose fiction both drew upon and problematized the theme of unfulfilled desire prevalent in the work of his literary predecessor. Similarly, in his effort to "revitalize the original," Saratchandra self-

consciously made use of the same characters, names and plotlines that were present in the work of both of his literary predecessors.

In Chapter 3 I move on to considering the predicament of the *tawaif* or courtesan in late nineteenth-early twentieth century Urdu and Hindi fiction. Just as the Widow Remarriage Act aimed at reforming a degenerate *bhadralok* Bengali elite, the Aligarh movement (1858-1898) and the Deobandi movement (1860-1900) aimed at reforming the *purdah-nasheen* or veiled Muslim woman through education.<sup>20</sup> This reform movement aimed at making the *purdah-nasheen* [veiled] Muslim woman a better pious subject by teaching her reading, writing and religion, so that she could serve as a spiritual guide to her husband who was contaminated by his contact with the British empire. The Urdu-speaking world valorized the *purdah-nasheen* woman as the true repository of Muslim culture in novels such as Nazir Ahmad's *Miraat-ul-Uroos* [The Bride's Mirror] and Hali's *Majalis un Nissa* [The Gathering of Women], both of which were aimed at setting examples for virtuous behaviour through exemplary female characters, who were always *purdah-nasheen* women.

However, at this historical moment, other writers such as Mohammed Hadi Ruswa and Premchand were concerned with the figure of the *tawaif* or courtesan who was left out of these narratives of *purdah-nasheen* women. I argue that just as the widow aspires to *satita*, the *tawaif* of these novels aspire to embody the norms upheld by *sharif* society such as modesty and devotion. I suggest that these narratives are framed by the Arabic notion of "translation" "*tarjuma*," (to explicate; paraphrase) because they explicate or paraphrase literary trends and contemporary politics. In

---

<sup>20</sup> See Minault, Gail. *Secluded Scholars: Women's education and Muslim social reform in India*. Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998 for a detailed analysis of the Aligarh movement. In her analysis, Minault suggests that the same impulse underwrote Hindu and Muslim reform movements: "For Muslims as for Hindu reformers, social and religious change did not mean aping the West, but rather arguing for a revitalization of tradition. This involved a hypothetical return to an idealized golden age, whether the age of the Vedas, or—in this case—the Islam of the Prophet Muhammad" (Minault 59-60).

other words, while M.H. Ruswa “translates” the poetics of *Sabk-i-Hindi* [Persian style Indian poetry] into the aspirations of his protagonist, Umrao Jan, Premchand “translates” the politics of the nationalist movement of *Satyagraha* into the aspirations of his protagonist, Suman.

In his essays on the Persian literary tradition in India, S.R. Faruqi describes the poetics of *Sabk-i-Hindi* as the product of an admixture of Arabic and Persian literary theory with Sanskrit poetics. Therefore, for the first time in the history of the *ghazal* [a mono-rhymed lyric poem] there was a split between the subject [*mazmun*] of the *ghazal* and its *ma’ni* [meaning]. Faruqi describes this shift in theorization within the context of the Arab-Persian literary tradition, which:

spoke only of *ma’ni* —a word now universally translated as meaning—in the sense of the “content” of a poem, the assumption being that a poem meant what it “contained.” Nursati [a Persian poet of the eighteenth century], however, uses *mazmun* in the sense of theme, content, the thing/object/idea, which the poem is about. The term *ma’ni* he uses to connote the “meaning,” that is, the inner, deeper, or wider signification of the poem” (Faruqi 5-6).

The split between *mazmun* and *ma’ni* became an important one for not only poets of the Persian *ghazal* but also for poets of the Urdu *ghazal*. Poets such as Mir Taqi Mir and Ghalib self-consciously utilized this split between *mazmun* and *ma’ni* to create poetry that was playfully ambiguous.

In the aftermath of the Mutiny of 1857 there was a radical shift in the *ghazal*’s status as a form of art. Azad and Hali decried the *ghazal*’s excessive emphasis on form and taking their cue from the English Romantics they extolled the virtues of poetry that was a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.”<sup>21</sup> However, despite their best efforts, the *ghazal* persisted as a dominant form of literary expression. Writing within

---

<sup>21</sup> For more details on this see Frances Pritchett’s *Nets of Awareness*.

this literary context, M.H. Ruswa “translates” the split between subject and meaning into the aspirations of his protagonist Umrao Jan. As a courtesan, Umrao Jan self-consciously uses the split between subject and meaning present in the *ghazal* form to create erotically suggestive poetry. However, while the subject of Umrao Jan’s utterance is love, its meaning is never love. Ruswa creates this split between subject and meaning to suggest that even though his protagonist is a prostitute, she is in fact a respectable woman who maintains her modesty by refusing to fall in love, in keeping with the mores established for *purdah-nasheen* women by the Aligarh and Deoband movements.

A similar process of “translation” is at work in Premchand’s *Sevasadan*. In this novel, Premchand “translates” the nationalist politics of *seva* or service through self-sacrifice into the aspirations of his protagonist, Suman. The nationalist movement of Satyagraha valorized suffering as a form of political resistance, a methodology which Gandhi describes as “passive resistance.” In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi writes:

Passive resistance<sup>22</sup> is a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms. When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul-force...If I do not obey the law and accept the penalty for its breach, I use soul-force. It involves sacrifice of the self (Gandhi, 79).

Selfhood here is created by an active rejection of violence (the *satyagrahi* refuses to do something “repugnant to his conscience”) and an embracement of non-violence to exert pressure upon the opponent (the *satyagrahi* accepts “the penalty for its breach”). The *satyagrahi* re-directs the violence of the colonial encounter onto his body, exerting a moral superiority of soul-force to engage the colonizer in an ethical

---

<sup>22</sup> In later explanations Gandhi eschewed the term “passive resistance” entirely, as it implied for him an abjuration of responsibility and replaced it with the term *satyagraha* which was more active in its connotations of resistance.

encounter with him. Gandhi perceived this use of suffering as soul force as primarily feminine and believed that women were uniquely equipped for *satyagraha* because they were accustomed to prolonged suffering at the hands of patriarchal society.<sup>23</sup>

This Gandhian conflation of the feminine with the nation was also evident in the strain of Hindu nationalism that was prevalent at the time. Hindu nationalists also reified women as the arbiters of Hindu culture, and as reservoirs of tradition, spirituality and chastity. Premchand combined this notion with the Gandhian ethic of suffering and sacrifice in his fictional work. This is evident in one of his early Urdu short stories, *Sair-e-Dervish* in which the narrator explicitly extols the virtues of Indian women:

It is indeed a pity that western nations should be pointing fingers on a race [the Indian] that produces such chaste women. I'll exchange a thousand European women for one such Indian woman... European society has no such ideals of chastity (Gopal 53).

Although not explicitly stated here, the “chaste” woman is naturally the Hindu woman, and it is her “chastity” that upholds the sovereignty of the nation. Likewise in *Sevasadan*, Premchand’s protagonist Suman aspires to become a *bharatiya nari* or Indian woman through suffering. Through the course of the narrative she learns to value suffering and sacrifice because they burn away the sins of her past life as a *tawaif* and thus enable her spiritual evolution. At the end of the novel, Premchand valorizes her as the ideal *bharatiya nari* because she sacrifices herself at the altar of her society to rescue it from moral depravity. Thus, in this novel, Premchand creatively “translates” the nationalist rhetoric of his time into a perfect ideal of Indian

---

<sup>23</sup> At different points in his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi praises her ability to maintain the vow of *brahmacharya* [celibacy] and not be overpowered by sexual desire, and reprimands himself for not being able to possess the same self-control. It is evident that he believes Kasturba’s self-restraint comes from her womanhood, more specifically from her identity as mother.

(read: Hindu) womanhood.

In my reading of these novels, I suggest that the modesty and devotion that the *tawaifs* of these novels aspire to embody is a product of their marginalization by *sharif* society. As women of “ill-repute,” who embody ideals that are normative to “respectable” women, the *tawaifs* of these novels disrupt nationalist constructions of the nation, which rely on the *tawaif*’s “otherness,” her immodesty, to construct the nation on the figure of the modest and devoted *pardah-nasheen* woman. In addition, the *tawaifs* of these narratives resist their inscriptions as “victims” of society, and therefore deflect imperialist efforts to “rescue” them from their helplessness.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, I contend that the gendered subaltern subject of both the Bengali and Urdu novel cannot be framed within the narrative of the nation. The widow’s voluntary suffering ought to make her the ideal subject of Gandhian resistance. However, while other female characters in Bankimchandra, Rabindranath and Saratchandra’s novels become catalysts for political change, the *bhadralok* widow never leaves the confines of the *bhadralok* novel to enter the political arena.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Suman, the protagonist of Premchand’s novel, is the ideal Gandhian subject, yet she too remains outside the fold of nationalist politics. These characters remain outside the fold of nationalist politics because the narrative of patriarchal nationalism and imperialism require the *bidhoba* and the *tawaif* to embody all that is other to the idealized woman; thus, the *bidhoba* is supposed to embody asceticism, which is other to the *kulalakshmi*’s legitimized expression of sexual desire, and the *tawaif* is supposed to express brazen sexuality, which is other to the *pardah-nasheen* woman’s

---

<sup>24</sup> See Jyotsna Singh’s *Colonial narratives/cultural dialogues: “discoveries” of India in the language of colonialism*. In her cogent analysis of British novels of the mid-nineteenth century, Jyotsna Singh suggests that “There is some evidence to suggest that colonialism’s benevolent face in the nineteenth century was premised on the assumption that both the British and native women needed to be “rescued” from the native male.” (Singh 81).

<sup>25</sup> The character of Shanti in Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s novel *Anandamath* and the character of Bimala in Tagore’s *The Home and the World*.

modesty. Ironically, both *bidhoba* and *tawaif* realize themselves only by inhabiting the norm that is denied to them, i.e. the *bidhoba* expresses devotion and the *tawaif* expresses modesty, both norms valorized by patriarchal nationalism.

However, because they are marginal figures their inhabitation of these norms is necessarily different than when these norms are inhabited by the idealized woman—the *kulalakshmi* or the *pardah-nasheen* woman. I argue therefore that their inhabitation of the norm radically changes it; thus, the *bidhoba's satita* [devotion] is sexualized and the *tawaif's sharam* [modesty] is formed through literature, while her *seva* [service] is grounded in self-sacrifice. Thus, the nation cannot usurp these gendered subjects for the project of nation building because they present an anomaly. Their “difference” is uncannily familiar yet not enough to render them into an “other” against which nationalists and imperialists can create the figure of the idealized woman who can be mapped onto the discourse of the nation.

Hitherto I have argued that Bengali and Urdu writers focused their narratives on marginal female characters who embodied normative ideals to disrupt homogenous narratives of the nation. I now turn from the specific constructions of gendered subjects to a more abstract discussion of the nation as a gendered subject in Chapter 4 where I focus on two literary texts in English that engage with this discourse of nation, namely, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2007). *Sacred Games* brings to the fore issues of translation that are key to debates that surround Indian writing in English. Indian writing in English has been regarded with suspicion by literary critics because it translates a social and cultural milieu into a language that some literary critics do not consider as authentically “native.” Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that the Indian writer's choice to write in English suggests his (or her) complicity with global markets and his (or her) fetishization and homogenization of India. Mukherjee attributes this essentialization of India to the

relative paucity of registers within which English functions in the subcontinent. She argues that English has no idiolect through which it can render the subtlety of cultural nuances, while regional language literatures capture the nuances of a “real” India because they are situated within a particular cultural milieu.<sup>26</sup>

Vikram Chandra’s polemical essay, “The Cult of Authenticity”<sup>27</sup> takes issue with Mukherjee’s claims and argues that as an Indian writer writing in English, his English is no less geographically and culturally grounded than a Hindi writer’s Hindi. He writes: “If Hindi is my mother-tongue, then English has been my father-tongue. I write in English, and I have forgotten nothing, and I have given up nothing.” This loyalty to multiple languages is evident in *Sacred Games*, which is not written in “English,” but rather an admixture of Hindi, Marathi and English which Chandra refuses to “translate” into idiomatic English. In doing so, he renders the novel linguistically opaque, i.e. to fully understand the novel it would be essential to understand the many languages that populate it. Chandra’s use of these multiple languages situates the novel in a particular social and cultural milieu of the Mumbai underworld. Reading the novel, then, requires a knowledge of its cultural milieu, much as reading Bengali fiction requires an understanding of *bhadralok* society. Thus, the language of the novel makes it only partially accessible to the monolingual English reader, and in doing so, the language of the novel foregrounds its alterity, its

---

<sup>26</sup> In a series of essays published in January-February 2001 in *The Hindu*, one of India’s leading newspapers, Mukherjee accused Vikram Chandra of pandering to Western audiences through the registers of English deployed in his fiction. Mukherjee’s anxiety about the authenticity of the Indian writer writing in English is present even in her earlier work. See, for instance, Meenakshi Mukherjee’s *The Twice Born Fiction: themes and techniques of the Indian novel in English* in which she delineates the difference between Indian writers writing in English and those writing in *bhasha* [regional] languages: “India may be a ‘discursive space’ for the writer of Indian origin living elsewhere, but those living and writing here, particularly the *bhasha* novelist, would seldom make figurative use of something as amorphous as the idea of India, because s/he has a multitude of specific local experiences to turn into tropes and play with” (M Mukherjee 181).

<sup>27</sup> In later weeks, literary critic Rajeswari Sunder Rajan also joined in the discussion over the Indian writer’s relationship with English as a medium of expression.

difference from the English novel.<sup>28</sup>

However, on another level, the novel assumes the reader's facility with the English canon because of the many references it makes to Kipling's *Kim*. Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel, *Kim*, has become paradigmatic in postcolonial studies as a text which explicitly glorifies the imperialist task of nation-building. As the colonial master of this novel, Kim the young boy-spy imposes secular colonial order on the pristine sacred space of the subcontinent through the Great Game of national espionage. Thus, the novel creates the subcontinent as a passive, feminine space, which needs to be conquered by its imperial masters. In his novel, Chandra self-consciously deconstructs the colonial binary oppositions between sacred-feminine-nation/secular-masculine-empire of Kipling's narrative by rewriting the Great Game into the "Sacred" Game of the postcolonial state. In doing so, the novel suggests that there is no "sacred" sphere removed from the politics of the postcolonial. Therefore, Chandra's novel disrupts imperialist and nationalist narratives of the nation that require the gendering of the nation as passive, female to perpetuate the myth of imperial power and national sovereignty. In addition, as a postcolonial novel, it also deconstructs the hyper-masculine religious nationalism of the contemporary nation-state, which is ultimately defeated by the secular forces of the postcolonial state. This chapter brings the dissertation's concerns to the present moment to suggest that the gendering of the nation continues to be engaged in the contemporary South Asian nation and its diaspora. This chapter then, helps us understand the complex articulations of the limitations of secularism in the production of national entities.

### III

---

<sup>28</sup> When first published, *Sacred Games* did not include any footnotes or glossary explaining or translating the idiomatic usage of many Hindi and Marathi words. Subsequent editions of the novel, however, have included a glossary for non-English words.

As Chakrabarty observes in his study of historiography, historians of the subcontinent have been suspicious of the intermingling of politics with religion and have therefore kept away from analyzing the occurrence of the sacred in the national body. Chakrabarty critiques the work of Marxist historian Sumit Sarkar because he “never considers the possibility that a religious sensibility might also us a political structure and a political vocabulary as a means to achieve an end or in the interest of an imagined life form in which the political could not be told apart from the religious” (Chakrabarty 23). Chakrabarty critiques the content of Sarkar’s history as secular because it does not account for knowledge systems that lie outside of the secular state. In the context of this project, I extend Chakrabarty’s critique of historiography to the study of literature. Like history literary criticism has shied away from excavating the sacred epistemologies of non-Western subjects, especially when they are implicated in politics. This project, then, is committed to exploring gendered articulations of the sacred in the context of colonial and postcolonial politics of South Asia.

## Between Home and the World:

### Devotion and the Widow in Late Nineteenth-Early Twentieth Century Bengali fiction

In this chapter, I consider the figure of the *bidhoba* [widow] as she is represented in late-nineteenth early twentieth century Bengali fiction. I suggest that contrary to current articulations of feminist theory, in which agency is synonymous with resistance, the upper caste, middle class Bengali *bidhoba* [widow] character exercises agency, by which I mean self-realization, through a performance of devotion or *satita* to a man other than her deceased husband. This act of devotion is replete with her unfulfilled sexual desires, and is also modelled sacred practices of devotion drawn from Hindu devotional practices. This paper, then, is an attempt to open up feminist modes of inquiry to include the sacred as a system of knowledge that can productively inform our understanding of gendered agency, through a close reading of late nineteenth-century Bengali fiction.

*Bhadralok* society revered the married woman as the *kulalakshmi* or goddess [*lakshmi*] of the household or clan [*kula*], and rejected the widow because she had lost her husband and was thus *alakshmi* or unlucky. While the conjugal bond tied the widow to her marital home, she lost all her rights within it the moment her husband ceased to exist. Due to the practice of marrying young girls to older men, a large number of widows were young women in their reproductive prime, who lived in their deceased husband's home, often within an extended family, where they looked upon conjugal relationships, but could not enter into any themselves. Although the *Widow Remarriage Act XV* of 1856 allowed a widow to remarry, this was taboo in *bhadralok* society, and thus a large number of widows were either burnt on the funeral pyre or

left to live an impoverished life in their marital homes.<sup>29</sup>

The figure of the nineteenth-century *bhadralok* Bengali wife and her counterpart the *bhadralok bidhoba*, has been the subject of much scholarly debate.<sup>30</sup> In his book, *The Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee argues that *bhadralok* women were the repositories of an asexual spirituality; a woman who defied this norm was considered Westernized and ‘would invite the ascription of all that the ‘normal’ woman (mother/sister/wife/daughter) is not—brazen, avaricious, irreligious, sexually promiscuous’ (P Chatterjee 131-132). In equating “good” Indian femininity with an asexual spirituality, Chatterjee occludes the possibility of a sexual femininity that is a part of Hindu *bhadralok* society, rather than a Westernized otherness. Feminists have hotly contested Chatterjee’s theorization of the *bhadralok* wife as a mere, asexual token of nationalist discourse, and suggested that the *bhadralok* woman was capable of autonomy and interiority.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> In 1829, the British-Indian government had passed a law prohibiting *sati*, but as Lata Mani suggests, this law was not enough to prevent the abolition of *sati*, in fact, it had the opposite effect as the number of *satis* increased after the law had been passed. However, there were still a large number of child widows who spent their life in utter misery because of the taboos surrounding widow remarriage. Social reformers such as Ishwarachandra Vidyasagar agitated for passing a law that would make widow remarriage legal, and in 1856 The Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act was passed by the British-Indian government. However, as Lucy Carroll argues, the passing of the law did not mean that widows were getting remarried because widow remarriage was still prohibited by customary law: “What about Customary Law, which by definition rests not in literary works but in the mores and behaviour of the people? The British-Indian courts gave lip-service to Customary Law, but in actual practice it was extremely difficult in most cases to prove custom in the face of the judicial presumption that Hindu (book) Law applied” (Carroll 79). For more details on the subject see Lucy Carroll’s “Law, Custom and Statutory Social Reform: The Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act of 1856.”

<sup>30</sup> The nationalist and colonialist emphasis on upper-caste, middle-class women occluded lower-caste, poor, Muslim women: “This image foregrounded the Aryan woman (the progenitor of the upper-caste women) as the only object of historical concern. [Meanwhile] the Vedic *dasi* (the woman in servitude), captured, subjugated, and enslaved by the conquering Aryans, but who also represents one aspect of Indian womanhood, disappeared without leaving any trace of herself in nineteenth century history...[The] Aryan woman came to occupy the center of the stage in the recounting of the wonder that was India” (Chakravarti, 28-29). For more details on this see Uma Chakravarti’s “Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*”

<sup>31</sup> See especially Himani Bannerji’s essay “Pygmalion Nation” in which Bannerji critiques Chatterjee’s insistence on the anti-modern. She argues that the inscription of the figure of the woman within an inner sphere of tradition necessarily subsumes modernity within the discourse of patriarchy. She upholds modernity as a constructive formation within which women could exercise their own agency. Thus, Bannerji’s argument equates modernity with agency.

Similarly, other feminist work has also emphasized the way in which the figure of the widow was co-opted by imperialist and nationalist discourse. Lata Mani's groundbreaking work on the colonial discourse of *sati* or widow immolation brings to the fore the production of the widow as an object of colonial strategies for power,<sup>32</sup> while Tanika Sarkar's *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* suggests that the figure of the widow was used similarly by nationalists as a symbol of the pristine, spiritual essence of India.<sup>33</sup> Building upon the work of these feminist theorists, in this paper, I suggest that the widow becomes the subject of the narrative of her life only in late-nineteenth-early twentieth century Bengali domestic fiction, written by male *bhadralok* writers who used the novel form to put forward their social critique of orthodox Hindu society.

The first novel to deal exclusively with this issue was Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Bisha Briksha* [The Poison Tree] (1873), which was soon followed by *Krishnakanter Uil* [Krishnakanta's Will] (1878); in both novels, widow protagonists fall in love with married men and eventually destroy the men and their households. The widow's illicit love for a man other than her deceased husband was a concern that persisted in the Bengali literary imagination because a few years later, Rabindranath Tagore reworked Bankimchandra's plot in his novel *Chokher Bali* [A Grain of Sand in the Eye] (1902), and Saratchandra Chatterjee reworked both novels in *Charitraheen*

---

<sup>32</sup> In her analysis of colonial discourse on *sati*, Mani writes: "The widow thus nowhere appears as a full subject. If she resisted, she was considered a victim of Hindu, male barbarity. If she appeared to consent, she was seen to be a victim of religion. Colonial representations further reinforced such a view of the widow as helpless by 'infantilizing' the typical *sati*. The widow is quite often described as a 'tender child'" (Mani 69).

<sup>33</sup> In her chapter, "Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal," Sarkar focuses on the figure of the Hindu widow, who remains unaccounted for in Chatterjee's theorization of the nation. She argues that the widow enables the construction of a pure spiritual sphere because "[S]trict ritual observances root [her] body in ancient India, thus miraculously enabling her to escape foreign domination. The cloth she wears is necessarily indigenous, the water she drinks is to be carried from the sacred river and not through foreign water pipes...Ergo, the nation needs ascetic widowhood" (Sarkar 42). Sarkar's theorization of the nation, then, foregrounds the widow's spirituality, thus separating her further from the outer sphere of materiality, which Sarkar signifies as "foreign domination." Her insistence on the widow's "asceticism" excludes the possibility of her sexuality, the desires of her body, its materiality. Once again, the widow is relegated to the "ancient," and the traditional; she is outside modernity, even as she lives within it.

[The Characterless One] (1913) and *Srikanta* (1917-1934). All three novelists were involved in varying degrees with the nationalist struggle, and thus they were all concerned with the “women’s question” in different ways.<sup>34</sup> As a staunch Hindu, Bankimchandra was primarily concerned with the way that the widow was reconfiguring the traditional structure of Hindu society. On the other hand, as a reformer deeply invested in women’s right, Saratchandra suggested that Hindu, caste society was to blame for the injustices perpetrated on the widow.

These debates occurred in local journals and newspapers, as well as in fiction.<sup>35</sup> The serial publication of novels in reputed literary journals such as *Jamuna*, *Bharatbarsha* and *Prabashi*, edited by famous luminaries such as Rabindranath Tagore and Dwijendranath Roy, made them the subject of serious consideration for the *bhadralok* reading public, who voiced their concerns and often compelled the author to reconsider the plot of his story. For instance, Saratchandra’s *Charitraheen*, a novel that dealt with a widowed maid-servant’s love for her master, provoked moral outrage in the reading public who could not stomach the thought of a maid-servant much less a widowed maid-servant falling in love with her master.

In a letter to his friend and editor Pramatha, Saratchandra writes: ‘I’m not bothered about my name, people may think whatever they about me...and whether it [*Charitraheen*] is immoral or moral people will read it eagerly...Phoni [the editor of *Jamuna*] has written that people await my stories eagerly. Let it be! “Time” alone will judge me for people make good decisions and bad decisions. To worry about their opinions is a mistake’ (S Chatterjee “Letter to Pramatha” 38-39). Despite his

---

<sup>34</sup> As Mahua Sarkar argues in her book *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal*: “For all their differences, both the reformers and the Hindu revivalists, much like the British, were invoking the woman question as a means first of establishing their adequate manliness—defined, presumably, by the degree to which they could control or co-opt women within the family—and then of asserting and justifying their respective claims to or desire for political power” (Sarkar 53).

<sup>35</sup> Ishwarachandra’s debate with Radhakanta Deb in 1856, for instance.

disavowal of public opinion, Saratchandra was compelled to change the unseemly conclusion of *Charitraheen* because of societal pressure. Thus, it is evident that fiction was an important medium for the dissemination of ideas and an agent of social change.

In this context of an evolving nationalist discourse centred on the figure of the widow, fiction provided an alternative means through which writers could explore the figure of the widow.<sup>36</sup> In what follows, I read the aforementioned novels as offering alternate trajectories for the widow's life. Through a close reading of these novels, I argue that the widow character of late-nineteenth century *bhadralok* fiction performs *satita* or devotion in an attempt to gain conjugality, domesticity and in some cases salvation for herself. Nineteenth-century *bhadralok* society privileged a particular Hindu notion of devotion or *satita*, which variously means chastity/devotion, and was a term used specifically for the good wife's undying devotion to her husband.<sup>37</sup>

Within the context of *bhadralok* society, the wife embodied *satita* or wifely devotion to gain god through service to her god-like husband. Once the wife became a widow she was supposed to renounce all the *bhadralok* signs of femininity, such as coloured saris, jewellery and long hair.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most significant sign of the wife's adherence to *bhadralok* norms of femininity is her *satita*, her devotion to her

---

<sup>36</sup> In her study of the widow character, Susie Tharu writes "It could be argued, and I am going to do so, that when a writer features a widow as protagonist he or she is, consciously or unconsciously, making an intervention in a debate centred on this figure....Widow stories therefore are invariably also subtly modulated historical engagements with questions of governmentality and citizenship" (Tharu 261). Following this, I too suggest that the widow character of Bengali fiction must be read as the *bhadralok* mediation between the private sphere of *bhadralok* social and moral codes and the public sphere of colonial law.

<sup>37</sup> The term *satita* comes from *Sati*, the mythological goddess who was married to the Lord Siva. Legend has it that *Sati*'s father, Lord Daksha invited all his daughters and their husbands to a great holy sacrifice, but neglected to invite his daughter *Sati* and her husband Siva because he was embarrassed of his son-in-law's hermetic appearance and unpredictable behaviour. When *Sati* learnt of the sacrifice she went to her father's palace and threw herself into the holy sacrificial fire because her father had insulted her husband. The term *sati* then, came to be synonymous with the good woman, and by extension the good woman was the one who would fulfill her duty by her husband by willingly immolating herself on his funeral pyre, and thus the term *satita* came to connote devotion both conjugal and spiritual to one's husband whether alive or deceased.

<sup>38</sup> For more details on the clothes worn by the *bhadramahila* in the late-nineteenth century see Meredith Borthwick's *The changing role of women in Bengal 1849–1905*.

husband, which will be her salvation and for which she is revered as a *kulalakshmi*. Therefore, the wife's ultimate act of *satita* is her self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre; thus, the widow's very existence suggests that she has failed in her *satita* to her husband.

Within this socio-historical context, the widow character's embodiment of *satita* is a contradiction in terms: it cannot exist because the object of her *satita* has passed away, yet it exists. I argue that in an attempt to resolve the question of the widow's place within *bhadralok* society, the novelists created the widow as the double of the wife. Thus, while the wife represented an asexual *satita*, the widow was her sexually aware counterpart. However, because the widow is not the *kulalakshmi*, her inhabitation of *satita* is necessarily different from the *kulalakshmi*'s asexual *satita*. I argue that widow replaces the *kulalakshmi*'s asexual *satita* with a *satita* that is sexual and spiritual at the same time. In making this argument, I come up against Dipesh Chakrabarty's theorization of the widow character of *bhadralok* fiction as embodying primarily an asexual *satita*.

Following Chatterjee, Chakrabarty sees the spiritual and the sexual as binary oppositions. Therefore for Chakrabarty, the widow's *satita* is characterized by *pabitrata* or purity and not sexuality. He argues that while the post-Enlightenment European subject possesses interiority and autonomy, the widow, as a product of an indigenous modernity, is characterized by *pabitrata* rather than sexuality. However, I argue that what differentiates these widow characters from the European post-Enlightenment subject is not their inhabitation of a Westernized modernity, but their performance of sexual desire which is intertwined with a longing-- not for autonomy (like the European subject)-- but for sexual *and* spiritual subjugation by the lord.

In making this argument, I build upon the theoretical framework of agency articulated by Saba Mahmood in her anthropological work on women's participation

in the Mosque movement in Cairo. Mahmood argues that in the context of Islamic Egypt, women realize themselves by acquiescing to the norms of Islam which necessitate submission to patriarchal authority, and thus, ‘what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment’ (Mahmood 14-15). The word Islam means submission, and thus the “discourses and structures of subordination” are intrinsic to leading a virtuous Islamic life.

Drawing upon Mahmood’s work, I suggest that a similar system of submission underlies Hindu practices of devotion, especially as they were articulated in Bengal. Bengali Hinduism was largely characterized by the particular strand of Vaishnavism promulgated by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a sixteenth-century saint, who believed that Lord Krishna could be achieved through intense loving devotion, which entailed a complete submission of the self to Krishna’s will.<sup>39</sup> This form of worship was known as *bhakti* or devotion and became a central feature of Bengali Hinduism.<sup>40</sup> Within the context of late-nineteenth century Bengal, this Hindu system of devotion had been formalized into the exclusive worship of Lord Krishna, over and above other Hindu gods.<sup>41</sup> However, the radicalism of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s doctrine of loving

---

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed account of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s life and teaching see Thomas Hopkins’s “The Social Teaching of the *Bhagavata Purana*”

<sup>40</sup> In her essay on the itinerant saint Mirabai, Kumkum Sangari suggests that *bhakti* was an inherently feminized form of worship, and was especially apparent in its Bengali manifestation “‘The ‘feminisation’ of worship is more pronounced in Vaishnav texts. This tendency was later foregrounded by Bengal Vaishnavism wherein “The essential nature of all men is that of a *gopi* [cowgirl] in the Bhagwat Purana, one of the relations it is possible to have with Krishna, among others, is that of a lover as the *gopis* do (BhP:4:1433-35)” (Sangari 1537).

<sup>41</sup> Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s vision of *bhakti* was popularized in the late-nineteenth century by Bijoy Krishna Goswami. He was an ardent worshipper of Krishna, who became associated with Rammohun Roy’s Brahma Samaj, but eventually withdrew from it to revive Krishna worship in the tradition of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu: “Bijoy’s [Krishna Goswami] partial disillusionment with the [Brahmo] Samaj led him to study the *Chaitanya Caritamrita*, a biography of the great *bhakti* saint, under the guidance of Harimohun Pramani. Bijoy visited various Vaishnava *gurus* but did not break with the Samaj. Instead in 1869 he returned to his work as a Brahma missionary, yet Bijoy increasingly blended devotional Vaishnavism as taught by Chaitanya with his own concept of Brahmoism...in 1899 he finally broke completely with the Brahma movement and began his career as a spokesman of revived Vaishnavism”

devotion had been subsumed by the overly ritualistic practices of Brahmanic Hinduism, in which men were the rightful worshippers of god, while women could hope only to reach god by worshipping their godlike husbands.<sup>42</sup>

The widow's desire for subjugation, then, stems from a larger discourse of devotion as subjugation. More specifically, I suggest that the widow's devotion is modelled on that of another widow, Mirabai, a fifteenth-century itinerant saint, who repudiated her lawful husband and considered Krishna her lord. The figure of Mirabai was popularized by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal and Mira's ecstatic worship of Krishna was taken to be paradigmatic of the true *bhakta's* worship of god. This form of Krishna *bhakti* popularized by Mirabai gained currency in Bengal and at the turn of the nineteenth century it was customary for Bengali women who had been abandoned by society, such as widows, to follow Mirabai's example and become *Vaishnavis*<sup>43</sup> or devotees of Krishna. However, the priests of the temple, upon whose goodwill these destitute women depended, often misused their power and compelled them to become prostitutes. Therefore, the term *Vaishnavi* came to be synonymous with a "loose woman" and consequently, the term for prostitute in Bengali and Hindustani was *baishya* or *vaishya*, a modification of *Vaishnavi*.<sup>44</sup>

The Bengali intelligentsia was very concerned with the liminal status of these women, who were once respectable *kulalakshmis* but had now been driven to prostitution. Bankimchandra condemned the sect of *Vaishnavis* because it was separated "by a very slight line from the utter negation of female morality which constitutes prostitution" (Sen 86). Saratchandra on the other hand drew sympathetic portraits of these unfortunate women in his fiction. In *Srikanta*, Kamal Lata, a minor

---

(Jones 40). For a detailed understanding of Bijoy Krishna Goswami's contribution to the revival of Vaishnavism see Kenneth Jones's *Socio-religious reform movements in British India*.

<sup>42</sup> For a detailed explanation of *bhakti* practices in Bengal see Edward Dimock's "Doctrine and Practice among Vaisnavas of Bengal"

<sup>43</sup> See Samita Sen's "Offences against Marriage."

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

character, is a widow who has become a *Vaishnavi*, and is the epitome of selfless devotion, but is charged with immorality because of her association with the sect of *Vaishnavas*. It is evident then, that the widow characters of these Bengali novels are drawn from the larger cultural context in which widows became *Vaishnavis*, and thus their devotion has the same sexual-spiritual tenor as Mirabai's devotion:

Though Mira appears in some ways to choose and advocate an ascetic way of life, her *bhajans* [devotional songs] are filled with sensuous yearning....In a sense it is the female, voice-with its material basis in patriarchal subjugation which provides the emotional force of self abasement and willed servitude....The sensuous symbolism and performative mode transgress the austere conventions of upper caste widowhood, but what occurs at the same time is that her songs re-evolve a new relation of bondage which is now replete with desire (Sangari 1472).

I read a similar bondage of sexual desire and spirituality as animating the widow's performance of *satita*. I suggest that this particular manifestation of the sacred in these novels represents an alterity that refuses to be subsumed within nationalist or imperialist discourses of "spirituality" and the nation.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, in my reading of these novels, I suggest that the widow's performance of spiritual and sexual subjugation evokes the unhomely [*unheimlich*] because it is a performance of that which has been repressed by *bhadralok* society.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> In her incisive study of women in late-nineteenth century colonial and nationalist discourse, Inderpal Grewal argues that nationalist constructions of Indian women were formulated in opposition to English constructions of British women: "For instance, in India the English *memsahib* is seen as idle, useless, and too free in her associations with men; the Indian nationalists construct the Indian woman, a reconstruction of a middle-class Victorian woman, as the moral and spiritual opposite of the Englishwoman. (Grewal 25).

<sup>46</sup> It is tempting to read the widow's desire for *satita* as an act of rebellion, and therefore of feminist agency, in keeping with the discourse of liberal humanism, in which agency is synonymous with rebellion. However, this is a peculiar rebellion, if it indeed is a rebellion because through this "rebellion," the widow defies one set of norms (of ascetic widowhood) in favour of another set of norms (of sexual and spiritual subjugation) in the hope of limiting her freedom.

Freud defines the unhomely as that ‘which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression’ (Freud 224). He discusses the unhomely in the context of a psychoanalytic reading of Hoffman’s ‘The Sand-man,’ where he suggests that Nathaniel’s childhood castration complex reveals itself in adulthood as the fear of having his eyes plucked out, and the manifestation of this fear is the unhomely. While Freud used his understanding of the unhomely for the purpose of psychoanalysis, Homi Bhabha adopts the notion of the unhomely in the colonial context. Bhabha suggests that the colonized subject’s condition of unhomeliness arises from the “deep historical displacement” (Bhabha 451) caused by colonial categories of differentiation (such as race), which alienate her from herself, and cause her to experience the “insider’s outsideness.” I contend that this displacement from the self, this experience of the ‘insider’s outsideness’ arises not from the racist ideology of the colonial state, but from the patriarchal norms of *bhadralok* society, which decree asexual asceticism for the widow.

In other words, the widow’s *satita* is illegitimate because she is a widow. Therefore, in the novels, the widow’s performance of *satita* is at odds with the *bhadralok* home because in these novels the home is metonymic for the nation. In her analysis of the construction of women in imperialist and nationalist discourse, Inderpal Grewal extends Chatterjee’s argument to suggest that “Indian women’s location in the women’s part of the house becomes the symbol of what is sacred and private for Indian nationalist culture” (Grewal 54). If the home is the repository of nationalist culture, and nationalist culture makes no space for the sexual-spiritual *satita* of the widow, then similarly, there is no space for the widow’s *satita* within the *bhadralok* home. In the novels, both the widow and her lover are compelled to leave the *bhadralok* home and set up a home elsewhere. The second home, then, becomes an externalization of the widow’s interiority, of her sexual-spiritual *satita*, and thus

another site of the unhomey. The second, illegitimate home cannot be housed within nationalist discourse or its extension, the *bhadralok* novel, and hence the narrative usually ends with the destruction of both manifestations of the unhomey: the second home and the widow. *Bhadralok* society's refusal to make space for the widow or the second home ultimately leads to its own destruction as the widow's enactment of her sexual-spiritual *satita* destabilizes its very foundations.

#### The Impossibility of Sexual *Satita*: Bankimchandra's *Krishnakanter Uil*

In this section, I argue that Rohini, the widow protagonist of Bankimchandra's novel, expresses an intensely sexual *satita*, in stark contrast to the asexual *kulalakshmi*. In enacting the repressed, Rohini's devotion represents the unhomey. I argue further that this *satita* therefore disrupts the foundation of the *bhadralok* home and by extension of *bhadralok* society, i.e. of both the home and the world. This *satita*, then, also disrupts Chatterjee's nationalist framework, for its overtly sexual overtones cannot be contained within a restrictive framework of an inner and outer sphere.

As a public intellectual, Bankimchandra was intensely preoccupied with the question of widow remarriage, and he wrote extensively about it both in essays and fictional accounts. In his essay, "The Confessions of a Young Bengal," (1872) Bankimchandra denounces the practice of "perpetual widowhood": "no enlightened human being can bring himself to believe in the moral excellency of perpetual widowhood;...The necessary minor premises being assumed, sound logic compels us to cry with one voice, Hinduism must be destroyed" (B Chatterjee "Confessions of a young Bengal" 140). The rationalist framework of his argument compels Bankimchandra to arrive at the conclusion that Hindu caste society is responsible for the widow's state of "perpetual widowhood."

Yet, in his fiction, Bankimchandra does not unequivocally condemn *bhadralok* society for perpetrating this injustice, but rather uses a third person omniscient narrator to both decry the widow's situation and to pronounce harsh judgment on her desire for *satita*. Therefore, Bankimchandra's first novel that deals exclusively with the condition of the widow, *Bisha Briksha* (1873), frames the widow as the helpless victim of Hindu caste society, but also condemns her for falling prey to the forces of evil that surround her. Nagendra, a wealthy *zamindar* (landowner) rescues a young woman, Kundanandini, from poverty and then arranges her marriage to his cousin who dies soon after. Kundanandini comes to live in Nagendra's household under the care and supervision of his wife Surjamukhi but Hira, a jealous maidservant, intervenes and connives to have naïve Kundanandini fall in love with Nagendra. Since Kundanandini's adultery is the result of another's devious doings, the narrator allows the reader to feel compassion for her plight when she is ejected from Hindu caste society and commits suicide. In this narrative, the reader is allowed to feel sympathy for the widow, Kundanandini, because she still remains the ideal, upper-caste, middle-class *bhariter nari* [Indian woman], whose fall is the result of a lower-caste, indigent maidservant's plotting. Thus, in this narrative, the caste-class dynamic reinforces the prejudices inherent in *bhadralok* society.

Bankimchandra's next novel, *Krishnakanter Uil* (1878) complicates the plot of *The Poison Tree* because its widow character, Rohini, also an upper-caste, middle-class woman, actively desires *satita*, and is therefore to blame for her own downfall. As the title of the novel suggests, the plot revolves around the will of a wealthy *zamindar* Krishnakanta. Angered and dismayed by his son Haralal's misdeeds, Krishnakanta wills his property to his nephew, Govindlal. An irate Haralal promises to marry a young widow, Rohini, if she replaces Krishnakanta's will with a new forged will, in which Haralal will inherit Krishnakanta's property. Desperate to enjoy the

benefits of conjugality once again, Rohini replaces the will, but Haralal retracts his promise. Consequently, Rohini resolves to replace the forgery with the true will. Ironically, it is when she is undoing her misdeed that Krishnakanta catches her in the act. He is determined to punish her, but Govindlal intervenes on her behalf and unwittingly falls in love with her. Govindlal eventually forsakes his wife Bhramar, leaves his ancestral home, and begins a life of “sin” with Rohini. In what follows, he discovers that Rohini is sexually rapacious, murders her, absconds, and arrives years later to find Bhramar on her deathbed. Brimming with repentance, he forsakes his life as a householder and becomes an ascetic.

Interestingly, all the events in this narrative are triggered because of a contestation over property, which in the novel represents a space removed from the colonial encounter because in the dispensation of property the indigenous elite could follow a set of norms that arose from the moral codes of *bhadralok* society, rather than through colonial law. In claiming his right to the property, Haralal makes use of the law of primogeniture, and, in doing so, disrupts the mores of *bhadralok* society in which obedience to the patriarch is both necessary to the maintenance of order and the *dharma* [duty] of the son. In this context, Haralal’s desire to marry Rohini is yet another transgression of the unwritten codes that maintain social order in *bhadralok* society. Rohini’s desire for *satita*, although present in the narrative from the outset, is latent, and only becomes explicit when Haralal proposes to her because it is only then, that conjugality becomes a real possibility. Therefore, all the events of the narrative are the result of Haralal’s transgression of the norms of *bhadralok* society. The novel, then, is an ominous commentary on the disruption of *bhadralok* norms by the introduction of “foreign” elements: the son’s disobedience and the widow’s latent desire for *satita*, which come to the fore only because there is a colonial law allowing widow remarriage. In what follows, I examine the symbiotic relationship between the

widow's desire for *satita* and the dissolution of *bhadralok* society.

From the outset of the novel, Rohini's desire for *satita* is coded as a desire to become a *kulalakshmi* through re-marriage. This is signalled in the narrative by Rohini's innocuous desire for fine clothes and good food, which are denied to her as a widow. Bankimchandra deploys a third-person omniscient narrator to mediate between Rohini's illegitimate desires and the mores of *bhadralok* society. The narrative voice therefore serves the function of contextualizing Rohini's desires: "She had become a widow very young, but had some habits improper to a widow; she put on black-bordered cloths instead of the prescribed white or grey, she wore bracelets on her wrists, and chewed betel, which gave her a forbidden pleasure and gave her lips a forbidden tinge of redness" (B Chatterjee *Krishnakanta's Will* 13). Rohini's desire for the *bhadralok* signs of femininity such as chewing betel, wearing bracelets and bordered saris suggests that she desperately desires to be re-integrated into *bhadralok* society as a *kulalakshmi*, and gain the right to conjugality, which is 'forbidden' to her as a widow.

Within the course of the narrative, these covert desires to become a *kulalakshmi* are made explicit as Rohini bemoans her fate as a widow. While the narrator is sympathetic to Rohini at the beginning of the novel, as Rohini's desires exceed the bounds of *bhadralok* society he disavows any knowledge of her desires:

What was passing through Rohini's mind I cannot tell, but it might have been something like this: "For what fault was I destined to become a widow while still a child? Am I a greater sinner than other people that I should be deprived of all joys of this world? For what fault am I, still young and beautiful, condemned to pass my life like a piece of dry wood? (B Chatterjee *Krishnakanta's Will* 29)

The narrator's disavowal and subsequent hypothesis reflects the tension in the novel

between condemning the widow's desire and expressing sympathy for her condition. The rhetoric of this passage suggests that Rohini's desire to become a *kulalakshmi* is explicitly entwined in her sexual desires.

This contradicts Chakrabarty's theorization of the widow's love as asexual *prem*: "*Prem* came to mark the autonomy of the individual in the widow by seeing the achievement of purity or *pabitrata* in love as the act of separating the self from the body. Society could indeed oppress the individual—in this case, the widow—but it could not take away her individuality" (Chakrabarty 140). Chakrabarty suggests that the widow separates her self from her body to realize her *prem* or asexual love because ties of kinship and the patriarchal extended family "obviated the emergence of a category such as 'sexuality' that could have mediated between the physical and psychological aspects of sexual attraction" (Chakrabarty 141). Through my close reading of the above passage, I suggest that Rohini's sexual desires explicitly disrupt the structures of kinship and the mores of the "patriarchal extended family," which Chakrabarty contends obviate the emergence of "sexuality."

I read the metaphor of the body as a 'piece of dry wood' as a veiled reference to Rohini's sexual desires, for the body as 'dry wood' needs only a lover's touch to flare into an all-consuming passion.<sup>47</sup> The word Rohini means 'sandalwood' in Sanskrit, and since the bark of the sandalwood tree is used ritually in Hindu sacrifices, Bankimchandra suggests that like sandalwood Rohini too is an integral part of Hindu caste society. However, here the bark of the tree is 'dry,' deprived of its fragrance, and hence discarded from its ritual use, just as a widow is discarded from Hindu society once she has ceased to be a *kulalakshmi*. Sandalwood is also used in the funeral pyres of upper-caste Hindus, and in this context, the body as the bark of the sandalwood tree

---

<sup>47</sup> In keeping with this, the metaphor of "dry wood" also becomes significant in the context of *The Poison Tree* (1873), where the adulterous love of a widow and a married man is called the "fruit" of the poison tree.

could also signify Rohini's resistance to being literally burnt on her husband's funeral pyre or figuratively burnt on the funeral pyre of an overly constraining Hindu society. Rohini's frustrated sexual desires can only be (socially) realized if she re-marries, and thus they are coded within her desire to become a *kulalakshmi*.

In keeping with the imagery of the funeral pyre, I read Rohini's desires as an allegory for spiritual devotion, especially within the context of Mirabai's *bhajans* [devotional songs], in which we find the same tropes of sandalwood, funeral pyre and burning.<sup>48</sup> In her analysis of Mirabai's *bhajans*, Sangari suggests that this devotional theme "wavers suspiciously between a suicidal love and the immolation of a deserted woman, between the fire of *virah* [separation] and a funeral fire, between a desired abstract union of two flames, and physical extinction as the path to such union" (Sangari 1549-1550). The metaphor above, then, can be read as a sexual-spiritual desire for self-extinction through the performance of *satita*, which becomes the widow's mode of expressing *bhakti*.

Modeled closely on the notion of Mirabai's *bhakti*, Rohini's *satita* is a desire for self-extinction through the embodiment of selfless *satita*. In the novel, Bhramar, Govindlal's wife is cast as the ideal *kulalakshmi* who embodies a completely selfless *satita* because she desires the wellbeing of her husband above her own. In an attempt to embody this selfless devotion, Rohini replaces the forged will with the original one, in which Govindlal will inherit Krishnakanta's property, even though she knows that if caught in the act her reputation will be ruined forever. However, Rohini's decision to embody the wife's selfless *satita* with no heed to the consequences for herself leads to her downfall not only because her devotion does not protect her, but also because her embodiment of *satita* is incompatible with her status as a widow.

---

<sup>48</sup> "Agar chandan ki chita banaau, apne haath jaiia jaa/Jal bal bhai bhasm ki dheri, apne ang lagaa jaa/Mira kahe prabhu girdhar naagar,/jot me jot mila jaa (BM:55). If/when I become/make a pyre of sandalwood: light it with your hand/And when ill burns to a heap of ashes apply it to your body/Mira says. Lord Girdhar mingle my light with yours" (Sangari 1549-1550).

Therefore, when she is caught in the act of replacing the will, Rohini refuses to explain why she risked her reputation for Govindlal because her *satita* is taboo in *bhadralok* society: “What was it? I shall never be able to tell. Please say no more about it. There is no treatment, no cure for my disease If I could come by some poison, I would take it, though not in your house...If after that I am still alive, let me be cast out of the village with my head shaved and whey poured over it” (B Chatterjee 52) In the narrative ellipsis of “What was it? I shall never be able to tell” Bankimchandra signifies the widow’s desire for *satita* as that which cannot be named because while wifely devotion can be known and celebrated as devotion, the widow’s *satita* is necessarily covert. The widow’s silent devotion seeks no recognition because it realizes itself in self-annihilation; it is a ‘disease’ because it consumes the one who bears it. The vehemence of her refusal to sully the purity of Govindlal’s house by her presence (alive or dead) makes her more attractive to Govindlal because in her self-abnegation, her pure, unselfish *satita* she resembles the ideal *kulalakshmi*. However, since she is a widow and not a *kulalakshmi*, her inhabitation of *satita* is marked as aberrant for there is no space for it within the conjugal framework of the ancestral *bhadralok* home. Just as Mirabai was ejected from her marital home because she expressed devotion to Krishna, Rohini’s embodiment of *satita* leads to her ejection from the *bhadralok* home and by extension from *bhadralok* society.

As discussed earlier, in the novel there is a symbiotic relationship between the widow’s *satita* and the *bhadralok* home. While Haralal’s misdeeds initiated the dissolution of patriarchal order, Govindlal’s desire for Rohini catalyzes its complete destruction. The destruction of the patriarchal family structure is literalized in the novel through a break in patrilineal norms of inheritance. Having first disinherited his son for his misdeeds, Krishnakanta now proceeds to disown Govindlal on account of his illegitimate desire for Rohini and bequeaths his property to Bhramar instead.

Having been ousted as patriarch, Govindlal has no choice but to leave his ancestral home. As the narrator remarks:

Meanwhile, Govindlal walked slowly to the outer part of the house. We must be truthful, and say that there were tears in his eyes. He remembered how happy Bhramar had made him with her simple, sincere, childlike love, how it had inspired her every word and flowed incessantly like a stream. He knew that he would never get back what he was now giving up. But he also said to himself that he could not undo what he had done (B Chatterjee *Krishnakanta's Will* 110)

Govindlal's tears arise in the "outer part of the house" the liminal space where repentance is still possible. However, he cannot retract his decision to step away from the *bhadralok* home, since his affair with Rohini has irrevocably marked him as an "outsider" to *bhadralok* society. Therefore, repentance, though intended, is deferred because he senses that his affair with Rohini has ruptured the space of the home: "he could not undo what he had done." Bhramar's "simple, sincere, childlike love," the "ideal" love of the *kulalakshmi*, prompts her to sign over the property to Govindlal and hence restore the "rightful" patriarchy of the home. However, Rohini's illicit *satita* ruptures the *bhadralok* home irrevocably, and therefore Bhramar's steadfast adherence to her duty as *kulalakshmi* cannot undo the damage. Once Rohini's illicit *satita* has ousted the patriarch from the *bhadralok* home, it ceases to exist, and hence when Govindlal builds a new home with Rohini, the ancestral home falls into disrepair, and Bhramar deteriorates into insanity.

In her analysis of late-nineteenth century nationalist accounts of the home, Inderpal Grewal argues that the nationalist notion of the home was an inversion of the English notion of the harem: "For the Indians, what colonial discourse termed the harem, a space of opacity, became then *home*, a reconstituted Victorian space that was

transparent in its clear manifestation of moral virtues as symbolized by Indian middle-class women” (Grewal 25). In Grewal’s theorization, the colonial rendition of the “opaque” harem is transformed into the inaccessible spirituality of the nationalist home. Similarly, I suggest that through another set of internal inversions the second home becomes the “harem” of *bhadralok* society. It therefore contains all that has been repressed in the *bhadralok* home, and therein becomes a site of the unhomely.

Rather than representing “moral virtue” the second home breeds vice (adultery) and death (murder). The omniscient narrator guides the reader through this house of vice, pausing to consider its relative merits and demerits:

As we enter a large room on the first floor, we notice that some of the pictures there are beautiful, but some others are so offensive as to be indescribable. We see a bearded Moslem music teacher who is tuning a *tambura* by plucking its strings and screwing its pegs, while a young woman is tapping a *tabla*, her golden bracelets tinkling with the movement of her hand. (B Chatterjee *Krishnakanta’s Will* 126)

As an externalization of the widow’s immoral *satita*, the second home is characterized by the uneasy coupling of beauty with vice; beautiful pictures coexist with ‘offensive’ and ‘indescribable’ pictures. The woman of the house is not engaged in housekeeping or domesticity, the rightful duties of the *kulalakshmi*, but rather in learning music. In the context of late-nineteenth century India, the study of music was associated primarily with the *tawaif* or courtesan, who was employed by the Mughal court as a professional entertainer.<sup>49</sup> In the context of the discourse of upper-caste Brahmanical Hinduism which permeates this text, the Moslem music teacher, becomes a symbol of the idle decadence of a decaying Mughal culture, and the house becomes the prototype of a refined nineteenth century brothel. This decaying Mughal decadence symbolizes

---

<sup>49</sup> For more details on this see Vidya Rao’s “Thumri as Feminine Voice.”

the dissolution of *bhadralok* society for in Bankimchandra's world, Mughal culture made Indians (read Hindus) effeminate and allowed them to become the victims of colonization.<sup>50</sup> At the end of the novel, we hear that the house symbolically falls into disrepair and is subsumed by the wilderness, thus suggesting that the widow's *satita* cannot be housed in *bhadralok* society.

*Bhadralok* society fails to make space for Rohini's sexual *satita* not only because it ousts the *kulalakshmi's satita*, but also because it is anomalous with the widow's function in society and this illegitimacy is signified in the narrative by Rohini's inability to fully become a *kulalakshmi*. The widow as *kulalakshmi* exercises a sexual *satita*, but in Bankimchandra's narrative Rohini's sexual desires exceed her performance of *satita*. Rohini thus cedes to the impulses of her sexuality and accepts another man's offer to become his mistress. On learning of her betrayal, Govindlal is enraged and murders her. Unlike *The Poison Tree* in which the unfortunate Kundanandini decides to kill herself, the protagonist of *Krishnakanter Uil* meets a bloodier end because she actively desires *satita*. The text's violent elimination of the widow's *satita* mirrors the violent modes (*sati*, social ostracism) through which *bhadralok* society deals with the widow. This suggests that the domestic novel can no more accommodate the figure of the *satita* desiring widow than *bhadralok* society can accommodate the real widow.

In his 1879 essay "Samya" (Equality), Bankimchandra makes explicit the difficulties attendant on accommodating the widow within *bhadralok* society:

We shall say widow remarriage is neither good or bad; that every widow should get married is never good, but it is good that all widows should have a right to marry if they so wish. The wife who is devoted her husband and loves

---

<sup>50</sup> Note, that in Bankimchandra's early nationalist text, *Anandamath*, the protagonist fights against Muslim rule, which was read by both imperialists, who banned the book and nationalists who celebrated it, as a thinly veiled allegory for British rule.

her husband never wants to marry again; even among people where widow marriage is prevalent those who are pure at heart, devoted to their husbands, affectionate, never marry again after the death of their husbands. But if a widow, whether she is a Hindu or some other religionist [sic], intends to marry after the death of her husband, she should have every right to do so (B Chatterjee “Samya” 193).

As a rationalist, Bankimchandra is compelled to allow the widow to remarry if she wishes to do so, but as a staunch Hindu, he is uncomfortable with the idea that a widow’s *satita* can extend to a man other than her deceased husband. This discomfort is apparent from the sentence structure of this passage, in which every positive assertion is followed by a withdrawal. Thus, he argues that a widow should be allowed to remarry after the death of her husband, but that no widow who has truly loved her husband would want to marry again. This convoluted logic suggests that if indeed the *kulalakshmi* is ‘pure at heart, devoted to [her] husband, affectionate’ i.e. she embodies *satita* she cannot transfer this *satita* to another man because if she did it would no longer be *satita*. Thus, although Bankimchandra allows his protagonist to express *satita* it is a *satita* that is radically different from the *kulalakshmi*’s *satita* because of its sexual overtones. In the novel, the logical extension of the widow’s sexual *satita* is that she ceases to be a respectable woman. Thus, within the course of the novel, Rohini is transformed from a respectable, upper-caste woman into a pleasure-seeking *tawaif* who associates with a Muslim man.

Sexual-Spiritual *Satita*: Rabindranath’s *Chokher Bali*

In *Chokher Bali* [A Grain of Sand in the Eye], Rabindranath Tagore rewrites

both *Krishnakanter Uil* and *The Poison Tree*.<sup>51</sup> The novel is once again the story of a beautiful widow's adulterous love for a married man. However, unlike Bankimchandra's novels, the married man of Rabindranath's novel, Mahendra, is unworthy of the widow Binodini's love. Mahendra rejects Binodini as a prospective wife without considering her merits and marries Ashalata, the bride selected for his close friend Behari. Consequently, Binodini is married to a poor relative who dies soon after, and a widowed Binodini vows to seek revenge on Mahendra. She resolves to win Mahendra's affection through her beauty and her embodiment of a sexual-spiritual *satita*, and a weak indolent Mahendra falls prey to her charms. Binodini elopes with Mahendra, and like Govindlal and Rohini, the couple set up their own home. However, in this novel, Binodini realizes that this home cannot fulfil her and she leaves it in search of Behari, her true love. Ironically, when Behari suggests marrying her, Binodini refuses to marry him and leaves for Kashi where she can pass her days in religious devotion.

In contrast to Rohini, whom Bankimchandra characterizes as given to moral depravity and unseemly pleasures and as therefore unfit to be a *kulalakshmi*, Rabindranath's Binodini is the ideal *kulalakshmi*, who masterfully performs all the duties of the *kulalakshmi*. Since Asha the *kulalakshmi* of Mahendra's home is incapable of managing the household, Binodini easily insinuates herself within the structure of the household, usurps all the domestic duties of the *kulalakshmi*, and thus becomes the shadow *kulalakshmi* of the household, the narrative double of the wife. However, Binodini differs from Asha because she is sexually aware, while Asha's sexuality is subsumed within the bond of conjugality.

Binodini's desire to become a *kulalakshmi*, then, is the product of her desire to

---

<sup>51</sup> In 2003 Rituparno Ghosh made a film based on this novel. This film won much critical acclaim and has been part of a recent spate in films about the figure of the late-nineteenth century widow (Deepa Mehta's *Water*) in South Asia.

express her sexual desires within a socially accepted form. However, because Binodini is an ideal *kulalakshmi*, and could therefore easily occupy Asha's position, the sexual undertones of her *satita* are coded in sado-masochistic terms. Once again a third person omniscient narrator mediates between the widow protagonist's desires and the mores of *bhadralok* society. However, Rabindranath's narrator is more sympathetic to his widow protagonist, and therefore situates her desires as the product of the injustice done to her by Mahendra, who denied her the opportunity of becoming his wife and therefore of becoming the rightful *kulalakshmi* of the *bhadralok* home:

He [Mahendra] had succeeded in lighting a fire within her and she couldn't figure out if it was love, hate or a mixture of both. She would smile bleakly to herself and say, 'Is there another woman with a fate like mine? I cannot even understand if I wish to slay or to be slain.' But either way, whether to be burned by or set fire to, Mahendra was indispensable to her. (Tagore *Chokher Bali* 60)

Like Mirabai and Rohini, Binodini deploys imagery that is usually associated with the death of the widow to frame her own sexual desires. Here, the imagery of "fire" makes explicit the widow's burning on her husband's pyre and it is ironically, this very "fire" that Binodini uses as a metaphor for her flaming sexual desires. The two connotations implicit in this imagery gesture to the sado-masochistic economy of Binodini's desire because although not literally burnt on the pyre of her husband, the overly constraining mores of *bhadralok* society punish her by not allowing her to express her sexual desires, which then threaten to consume her, figuratively speaking.

I argue that since Binodini's desires are not legitimate within *bhadralok* society, she cloaks her desires as the performance of wifely *satita*, but the sado-masochistic undertones of her sexual desire are nevertheless visible in this, as well. Her performance of wifely *satita* necessitates her complete subjugation to her

“husband,” but her own sexual desires interrupt the performance of a perfect wifely *satita*. This becomes explicit when Binodini has Asha write a love letter to Mahendra using the language of an abject wifely *satita* to convey her sexual desires:

You haven't answered my letter. It's a good thing actually...When the devotee prays to her lord, He seldom gives an answer to her face. But I suppose this poor soul's devout offering has found a place at your feet. But if the devotee's prayers wrack your concentration, please don't take it amiss, lord of my heart! Whether you grant her wish or not, whether you turn your eyes to her or not, whether you come to know of her or not, this devotee has no option but to offer you her heart. Hence I write these lines today—O my stone-hearted god, stay steadfast on your course (Tagore *Chokher Bali* 66).

The tone of the letter suggests gentle submission to patriarchal authority, and its language is suffused with religious devotion. However, a close reading of this letter reveals that the language of ostensible devotion is rife with reproaches and reprimands: Mahendra is Binodini's god, but a 'stone-hearted god' who carelessly shirks away his devotee's offerings. Binodini's "devotion" is a barely concealed reproach to Mahendra for ignoring her. In couching this devotion in the vocabulary of the sacred, I argue that Binodini manipulates the registers of *satita* to gain Mahendra. She cleverly designs the letter so that it flatters through its language of wifely *satita* even as it reproaches him. It is calculated to provoke Mahendra's ire by suggesting that he does not love her, which undoubtedly will quickly rouse him to a passionate declaration of love. Thus Binodini's submission transgresses Tanika Sarkar's notion of the wife's loving submission to the husband because she uses her complete submission to the wishes and desires of the lord/husband, her wifely *satita* with undertones of sexual subjugation, as a manipulative strategy to bind Mahendra closer to her.

In the course of the novel, Binodini succeeds in drawing Mahendra closer to

her, and like Govindlal, Mahendra too forsakes the *bhadralok* home for Binodini, and the couple set up a second home. However, unlike Rohini's home, the home in this novel is not a den of vice. While Rohini's second home represented its mistresses' own infatuation with luxury, Binodini's second home reflects her estrangement from herself. She had imagined that being the mistress of a home would enable her to realize her sexual *satita* which would yield the pleasures of conjugality. However, she realizes that Mahendra, the object of her devotion, is unworthy of her *satita*. While in *Krishnakanter Uil* the second home became the nationalist image of the brothel, in this novel, the second home becomes the catalyst for Binodini's spiritual awakening:

Binodini, who loved to do the housework to perfection, felt stifled in the walled confines of this house where she had nothing to do—all her energies turned inwards and lacerated her instead...Binodini felt relentless hatred and disgust for Mahendra, the senseless fool who had closed out all her escape routes and contracted her life thus...(Tagore *Chokher Bali* 167)

As an externalization of her internal state, the home too becomes a manifestation of the unhomey; rather than being a repository of sanguine conjugality as Chatterjee suggests, Binodini experiences the home as a confining prison that traps her. The once familiar episteme of wifely *satita* which she exercised to gain Mahendra now acquires monstrous hues and becomes estranging and unfamiliar to her because it has incited Mahendra's naked lust rather than his loving protection as a husband, and thus it becomes an embodiment of the unhomey. Repulsed by her own embodiment of sexual *satita*, Binodini self-consciously recreates her *satita* as spiritual devotion to Behari, a character whose imperviousness to her charms makes him god-like in her eyes.

Unlike the earlier instance, in which Binodini invoked the register of the sacred to gain Mahendra, in this instance, Binodini's performance of spiritual *satita* is

without any ulterior motive; it is simply a tribute to Behari, her true lord and master.<sup>52</sup> Thus, at the very end of the novel, when Binodini lives in Behari's house unbeknownst to him, she adorns his bed with jasmine flowers in his honour, just as a devotee offers flowers to her god, "You had once slept in this room—I have dedicated it to your memory; those flowers were used to worship your thoughts and they lie there now, withered and lifeless" (Tagore *Chokher Bali* 193). In the Hindu tradition, the bed is adorned with flowers on the wedding night, when the marriage is to be consummated, but because Binodini is a widow, her devotion, replete with unrealized sexual desire, cannot come to fruition, and thus, the flowers she offers to "worship" her true lord wither away before his arrival.

Although the narrative of *Chokher Bali* offers the possibility of a third home in which the widow might fulfil her sexual desires through remarriage and hence become the legitimate *kulalakshmi* of a household, by the end of the novel, Binodini transcends her desire for a *satita* framed in conjugal terms. Like Mirabai, Binodini rejects an earthly, inevitably flawed husband in favour of a divine husband, who is flawless. A liberal secularist reading of the novel would insist that Binodini's rejection of Behari simply perpetuates the norms of *bhadralok* society, which do not allow the widow to remarry. However, Binodini's devotion is agentive if we read it within the context of the sacred, in which Binodini's rejection of Behari in favour of an idealized husband enables her self-realization, much like Mirabai's renunciation of the world enabled her to attain her divine husband, Krishna.

Rabindranath regretted the ending of his novel after it was published because as a social reformer dedicated to the "women's question," widow remarriage in his novel could have set a precedent for social reform within *bhadralok* society. However,

---

<sup>52</sup> Note, Rabindranath's use of the image of the marriage bed to describe Binodini's spiritual devotion, is in keeping with the imagery deployed in Mirabai's *bhajans* to suggest her union with Krishna. As Sangari writes: "Since Krishna is a god, their *sej* (marital bed) can be an abstraction, and *bhakti* a path" (Sangari 1467) to reach Krishna.

Rabindranath was prevented from this radical conclusion, by his own view of literature as surviving only when it speaks “of the world around it, because it survives more by the force of its surroundings than by its own strength” (Tagore “Literary Creation” 153). His novel, therefore, is committed to representing the world around him, in which widow remarriage though legal was socially unacceptable.<sup>53</sup>

#### Re-thinking *Satita*: Sexuality and Devotion

By the time Saratchandra Chatterjee entered the literary fold, the nationalist movement was in full swing. His first novel *Baradidi* [Elder Sister] was published in 1907 after the Partition of Bengal (1905) by Lord Curzon along communal lines. The Hindu-Muslim agitation for a united Bengal reflected a burgeoning national consciousness. In this political scenario, the “women’s question” was sidelined in favor of the nationalist agenda, or as in the case of Rabindranath, the two were intermingled (*The Home and the World* [1916]) to suggest that nationalists needed to think about the role of women in the context of the national movement. However, Saratchandra’s fiction from the outset stayed clear of nationalist politics, as is seen in *Charitraheen* (1913), his first novel on the subject of widow remarriage. In the same year that Rabindranath published his overtly nationalist novel, *The Home and the World*, Saratchandra published a novel that dealt explicitly with the theme of widow remarriage, *Palli Samaj* [The Homecoming] (1916), which was soon followed by *Srikanta* (1917-1933 in serial form).

Saratchandra’s persistent engagement with the figure of the widow in novel after novel was the result of his deep commitment to women’s rights. In his polemical essay, “Narir Mulya” [The Value of Woman] (1923), Saratchandra argues

---

<sup>53</sup> Note that in *The Home and The World* too, Bimala is prevented from becoming an active figure in the nationalist struggle by the exigencies of her role as a *kulalakshmi*.

vociferously against caste Hindu injunctions preventing widow remarriage, denouncing those “learned people” who uphold the *Shastras* [Hindu scriptures] to defend their opinion: “Is widow marriage right or not? If I want to know that, they [the learned men] simply open the *Shastras*. They always want to find the answers in the verses of the scriptures and because of this their vision has become very narrow” (S. Chatterjee “Narir Mulya” 947). Saratchandra’s fiction, therefore, self-consciously opens new possibilities for its widow protagonists as he re-imagines the agentive capacity of their *satita* through a careful reworking of the central tropes in the fiction of his literary forerunners.

Writing after both Bankimchandra and Rabindranath, Saratchandra’s domestic fiction undoubtedly draws on the work of his literary predecessors, even as it differentiates itself from them. While his literary predecessors required the widow characters of their novels to realize themselves through a patriarch, the widow protagonists of Saratchandra’s fiction realize themselves simply by embodying *satita*. I argue further that the notions of *satita* extant in Saratchandra’s novels are a logical extension of the notions of *satita* put forth by the other two novelists. Therefore, as an extension of Rohini’s intensely sexual *satita*, the widow protagonist of *Charitraheen*, Kiron utilizes a sexually inflected *satita* at first, but then discards it and expresses her sexual desires without the frame of *satita*. Similarly, as an extension of Binodini’s spiritual *satita*, Rajlakshmi, the widow protagonist of *Srikanta* embodies a wholly spiritual *satita*, which likewise does not need the presence of a patriarch to realize itself.

The plot of *Charitraheen* combines elements from all three novels and repeats several narrative tropes, such as the beautiful widow, the asexual wife, the second

home<sup>54</sup> but radically reworks them to reflect Saratchandra's own intellectual position. Like Binodini in *Chokher Bali*, Kiron, the beautiful widowed protagonist of this novel is exceedingly intelligent and accomplished, and like Binodini she falls in love with a married man, Upendra. Upendra's wife, Surbalala, on the other hand, most closely resembles Surjamukhi, the chaste, pious devoted *kulalakshmi* of *The Poison Tree*, and in the novel, she acts as Kiron's narrative double. A parallel plot line involves Sabitri, who like Binodini is a young, beautiful upper caste widow, whom circumstances have driven to work as a maidservant in a youth hostel, and who falls in love with her master, Satish, whom she serves because it is both her duty and her joy.<sup>55</sup>

Unlike the other novels, which restrict character doubling to the wife and the widow, in *Charitraheen*, Saratchandra also creates his two widow characters as doubles of each other. Thus, while Sabitri embodies a wholly asexual selfless *satita*, Kiron embodies a sexual *satita*, which she then discards in favor of simply expressing her sexual desires as they are. Kiron's character hence represents a radically new possibility for the widow. However, the narrative fails to accommodate Kiron's sexual desires, and like the widow characters of Bankimchandra and Rabindranath's fiction, she too meets an unseemly end. By this logic, Sabitri should be rewarded for being the mirror opposite of Kiron, but Sabitri too meets an unhappy fate because although upper-caste she is of a lower class, and her marriage to Satish would unsettle the patriarchal structure of *bhadralok* society.

Although both Kiron and Sabitri's stories run parallel in the novel, Kiron's story overshadows Sabitri's both in its narrative depth and complexity. Since Kiron's

---

<sup>54</sup> In a parodic moment in *Charitraheen*, Saratchandra has Divakar, a naive aspiring writer, write a story entitled *The Poisoned Knife*, whose characters have names similar to that of characters in *The Poison Tree*. Thus, Kundanandini and Nagendra become Nagendranandini and Nagendra becomes Vijoyendra.

<sup>55</sup> Like Kundanandini of *The Poison Tree*, Sabitri is in a situation of disempowerment, but unlike Kundanandini she does not desire conjugality or domesticity, but rather *satita* for its own sake. Thus even though no wife prevents the marriage of Satish and Sabitri and Satish truly desires Sabitri, Sabitri refuses to marry him but continues to unselfishly serve him because Sabitri realizes her self through the performance of *satita*.

story mirrors Rohini and Binodini's story more closely than Sabitri's story, Saratchandra foregrounds it in an attempt to make explicit through rewriting his own intellectual position. Just as Rohini and Binodini act as narrative doubles to Bhramar and Asha, respectively, Kiron also acts as the double to Surbala, the pious chaste *kulalakshmi* of this novel. In an interview with his uncle, Saratchandra explicitly states that Kiron and Surbala are but two aspects of a single character: "Surabala [was]...a faithful and devoted wife full of love, respect and attraction for her husband...Kironmoyee I have built with the same ingredients of whose existence I came to know through Surbala's teaching" (Prabhakar 120-121). By creating Kironmoyee from the "same ingredients" as Surbala, Saratchandra suggests that there can be no Surbala without Kironmoyee, no pious wife without her sexually aware counterpart. Inflamed by Upendra's passion for Surbala, and his high opinion of her intelligence, Kiron decides to confront Surbala in a philosophical debate. Although confident at first that she will defeat Surbala through intellectual reasoning, Kiron soon realizes that it not Surbala's intellect that she must contend with but her unceasing devotion to god and by implication to her god-like husband.

Kiron resolves to embody Surbala's *satita* within her own character and compels herself to nurse her sick husband, to see him as a manifestation of god, but he remains all too human for her because she is fully aware of his flaws and the weakness of his character. Therefore when her husband dies, Kiron does not devote herself to deifying his memory, but offers herself to Upendra, a man whom she does consider worthy of her *satita*. Like the widow protagonists of the other novels, her devotion to Upendra, is not the untainted, asexual, selfless *satita* of the *kulalakshmi* for her husband, but rather the sexually inflected *satita* of the widow:

I repeat Thakurpo [brother-in-law], that I know the outcome of this shameless impudent offer of mine at your feet. I know, you have a crystal clear,

impenetrable character, and it is beyond me to put a scratch on it. But then, human character is such it always longs for the things that are beyond its reach. It is only because they can't find God that they seek Him by offering everything they possess. That's why I feel that so far as I am concerned I would never have been so much in love with you if you had not been so unobtainable (S Chatterjee *Charitraheen* 216).

By creating an analogy between her own sexual *satita* for Upendra and a devotee's devotion to god, Kiron blasphemes the tenets of Brahmanic Hinduism, according to which the widow has no sexual desire, and the devotee's desire for god is swept clean of any sexual longing. This intermingling of the human with the divine, of sexual desire with spiritual longing is reminiscent of Mirabai's longing for Krishna, as discussed above. Similarly, Kiron frames her desire for Upendra as "shameless" and "impudent," because that is how it will be construed by *bhadralok* society, just as Mirabai's desire for Krishna was construed as indecent by Rajput society.<sup>56</sup>

Following Mirabai, Kiron abandons societal opinion in favor of her own desires, but unlike Mirabai, whose devotion was overtly spiritual even as it was sexual, Kiron uses spirituality as a frame for her sexual desire. Thus, in *Charitraheen*, Saratchandra offers a third model of *satita*, which is not simply the sexual *satita* that Binodini performs to gain conjugality nor is it her passionately spiritual devotion to attain god, but rather a sexual *satita* that is not inherently spiritual, but which mobilizes a spiritual self-abnegation because it recognizes that the object of its devotion is as unattainable as god, and therefore requires an "offering of everything" including the dignity of the self.

In the process of attempting to realize her sexual desires Kiron does away with

---

<sup>56</sup> Many of Mirabai's *bhajans* characterize the devotee, Mira, as shameless: "*Laaj saram kul ki marjaada, sir se door kari*" (BM: 56; quoted in Sangari 1467). Since the original essay doesn't provide a translation, I offer one here: "She brushes away considerations of shame, of modesty and of the dignity of her family [in pursuit of Krishna]."

the frame of *satita* completely. She bolsters her perspective by using the example of the love between Govindlal and Rohini in *Krishnakanter Uil* which was motivated primarily by sexual desire, and declares that “No love can ever be detestable” (S. Chatterjee *Charitraheen* 253). In framing Rohini’s sexual desires as love, Kiron legitimizes them and in doing so subtly condemns the mores of *bhadralok* society, which decree Rohini’s love as illicit. This disavowal of *bhadralok* society enables Kiron to pursue her sexual desires without the frame of *satita*. Like Binodini, Kiron’s model of *satita* changes with her experience in *bhadralok* society; thus, when Upendra rejects her offer of *satita* through re-marriage she rejects *satita* altogether and focuses entirely on fulfilling the desires of her body. Her decision to express her sexual desires shorn of *satita* is a self-conscious one, for she fully understands the consequences of her actions: “Both [individuals and society] have a borderline—and there will be calamity if you cross that line through ignorance or the urge of instinct or through importunity” (S Chatterjee *Charitraheen* 283) she observes. Yet she herself willfully crosses the “borderline” between propriety and impropriety when she elopes with Divakar, Upendra’s protégé, and sets up a second home with him in Rangoon.

Saratchandra’s narrative offers the possibility of a widow experiencing sexual pleasures outside the frame of *satita* as re-marriage. However, Saratchandra fails to realize this narrative vision in his novel because the reading public was outraged by the first few installments of his novel. In a letter to Pramatha, his friend and editor, he defends his intellectual position, “But I don’t have any other way of doing things because I’m naked—I cannot hate or disapprove of Art. But I will see to it that it [*Charitraheen*] is ‘in [the] strictest sense moral’ [in English]” (S Chatterjee, “Letter to Pramatha, April-May (undated), 1913” 79). Therefore, in future installments, Saratchandra toned down his narrative to make it in the “strictest sense moral.”

In keeping with the social mores of *bhadralok* society, his widow protagonist

suffers a similar fate to Rohini when she acts on her sexual desires. Since there is no re-marriage that justifies this desire, predictably enough the second home falls into disrepair. The second home is a cruel caricature of the *bhadralok* home: it is a mere hovel infected with all the vices of the outside world—prostitution, poverty, greed. Unlike the other *bhadralok* novels, in which the second home is removed from *bhadralok* society, but is still in Bengal, in this novel, the second home is in Rangoon, Burma, and therefore far removed from Bengal. At the time of the novel, a large Bengali population had migrated to Rangoon to search for work, and as a result was stigmatized by Bengali society as not being truly Bengali. In this context, Kiron's move to Rangoon suggests that her desires are so improper that they cannot be contained within *bhadralok* society.

Kiron's desires then, breach the "borderline" between the home and the world, between the domestic and the political, and thus the second home becomes the site of the Bhabha-ian unhomey because it confounds the boundary between home and the world, bringing "the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world" (Bhabha 445).<sup>57</sup> The presence of the unhomey ultimately acts to destroy both the second home and the widow. Thus, although Saratchandra allows his character the freedom to make explicit her sexual desires, justify them and act on them, at the end of the novel, Kiron becomes mentally unstable and is expelled from *bhadralok* society, thereby suggesting that there is no space for a sexuality shorn of *satita* in *bhadralok* society.

While Kiron's embodiment of sexual desire destroys her, I argue that the widow protagonist of *Srikanta*, Rajlakshmi realizes herself through her spiritual desires, which she expresses without the frame of *satita*. Saratchandra's magnum opus, *Srikanta*, published serially in four parts over a period of seventeen years (1917,

---

<sup>57</sup> As the title of Rabindranath's novel 1916 *The Home and the World* suggests, the *bhadralok* home continued to retain its importance in the national imaginary even when the so-called "women's question" had been purportedly resolved. As Rabindranath's novel suggests, in the new nationalist framework, the home became the site of "*bharat mata*" or the Indian woman as mother India.

1918, 1927, 1933) is the story of a young girl Rajlakshmi who falls in love with her childhood friend Srikanta, but is forced to marry an older man who dies soon after. Srikanta remains unaware of Rajlakshmi's childhood love for him, until years later he meets a strangely familiar courtesan who reveals her identity and confesses her love for him.

Unlike the other novels I have examined so far in which the widow acts as a double for the wife, in this novel, the doubling is internal to the widow's character because Rajlakshmi is both the courtesan, Pyari, and the ascetic widow. While Rohini's transformation into a *tawaif* ultimately led to her downfall, in this novel, Saratchandra reworks the trope of the widow as a potential *tawaif*, by creating a character who is widow, *tawaif* and wife all at once. However, even as a courtesan, Rajlakshmi's *satita* never acquires the sexual hues of Rohini, Binodini or Kiron's *satita*, but remains curiously asexual. Rajlakshmi embodies the *kulalakshmi*'s asexual *satita* not because she desires to become a *kulalakshmi*, but because she hopes to wipe out her transgressions as a courtesan through it. *Satita* then becomes a means through which Rajlakshmi achieves spiritual self-realization.

For Rajlakshmi to achieve self-realization through her embodiment of asexual *satita*, the object of her devotion, Srikanta, needs to be dependent on her devotion. Therefore, Saratchandra creates Srikanta as a constitutionally weak character who needs a strong woman to nurse him back to health. After one of his bouts of sickness, Srikanta thanks Rajlakshmi for rescuing him, yet again, "It was my great good fortune that, in my delirium, your words "Remember me in your sorrow if not in your joy," came back to me. I owe my life to you"(S Chatterjee *Srikanta* 87). Rajlakshmi's injunction to Srikanta reinforces the unequal dynamic of their relationship while simultaneously drawing attention to Rajlakshmi's perfect self-effacing *satita*.

In her reading of *Srikanta*, Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests that Rajlakshmi and

Srikanta never marry because “Rajlakshmi does not want to degrade Srikanta by laying claims on him” (Mukherjee 45). However, the novel explicitly suggests that while Srikanta is desirous of formalizing his relationship with Rajlakshmi by marrying her, Rajlakshmi refuses the role of wife after she has successfully embodied wifely *satita*, so that she might move towards spiritual salvation. Srikanta himself acknowledges that, “all her rituals, prayers and pilgrimages were part of a passionate endeavor to wipe out the past...Hence this frantic beating of wings against the bars of her present existence, this desperate struggle to escape into the world beyond. And the terrible irony of it was that I, whom she loved, was the principal bar” (S Chatterjee *Srikanta* 253). This elaborate metaphor of a bird trapped in a cage suggests that Rajlakshmi is trapped by her role as *kulalakshmi* because it restricts her spiritual progress. In this analogy, Srikanta, the patriarch of the novel, is ironically, the “principal bar” that prevents Rajlakshmi from realizing herself through her spiritual *satita*.

Therefore, Rajlakshmi eventually does away with the framework of conjugality altogether in pursuit of her spiritual salvation, and Srikanta too is similarly removed from her path. This becomes explicit when like a good *kulalakshmi*, Rajlakshmi requests Srikanta’s permission to perform a religious ritual, but does not take his refusal into account. This moment in the narrative marks a decisive shift in power dynamics. Having removed Srikanta from her devotion, Rajlakshmi leaves Srikanta adrift. Srikanta mourns this unaccountable erosion of his power over Rajlakshmi:

I had never asked for such devotion, not knowing what to do with it. I had fought her with all my strength but she had forced her way into my life with the passion and turbulence of a mountain stream, shattering all resistance. Now the stream was changing direction with the same ruthlessness with which it had

come and my faint cries of distress were lost in the sound of rushing water...An overwhelming sense of loss was upon me at that moment. I stifled it as best as I could but the tears went on falling. (S Chatterjee *Srikanta* 251)

Srikanta characterizes her devotion as “ruthless” and “turbulent,” primarily because it does not care for him, and in keeping with the analogy he characterizes his ousting from the role of patriarch as drowning. This displacement results in a complete loss of control and Srikanta speaks of even his tears as alienated from him, he no longer has control over them, “the tears went on falling.” Rajlakshmi transforms the once familiar asexual *satita* of the *kulalakshmi* into spiritual *satita*, which is strange and unfamiliar, an expression of the unhomely, because the patriarch is removed from this paradigm of *satita*.

This expression of the unhomely, the triumph of Rajlakshmi’s spiritual *satita* over her conjugal *satita*, overturns the framework of *satita* decreed by *bhadralok* society, in which a woman’s devotion must be confined to her god-like husband.<sup>58</sup> Having rejected Hindu societal conventions when she moved from widowhood to prostitution, Rajlakshmi holds dear a spirituality that is internally coherent, but fundamentally at odds with the expectations of *bhadralok* society, according to which “rituals, prayers and pilgrimages,” are incumbent upon the widow as a form of penance, but not as a form of salvation.<sup>59</sup> In the narrative it is evident that Rajlakshmi’s spiritual *satita* is a means towards her own salvation, rather than an

---

<sup>58</sup> Kamal Lata, another minor character in the novel reflects this aspect of Rajlakshmi’s personality. An avowed Vaishnavi, Kamal Lata pursues her desire for union with god indifferent to the gossip and the glaring public disapproval of her caste and prior conduct that surrounds her.

<sup>59</sup> As Sangari argues in her analysis of Mirabai’s devotion, Brahmin women could only use self-renunciation as a means of salvation when they became widows: “The *grahasthaashram* of a woman simply ends on her husband’s death. Then a ‘voluntary’ obedience to custom is exhorted. The upper caste widow should be an austere renounces she must emaciate her body, and live voluntarily on flowers, roots etc (MDS: 135). Second, because renunciation so utterly contradicts wifedom and domestic surveillance, it is only permissible under duress (and that too only in some *dharmashastras*), for an abandoned woman or a widow.<sup>21</sup> In some sense then the absorption of the widow into the renunciatory mode is both acceptable and threatening (it requires for some biographers the sanction of a Tulsidas!)” (Sangari 1467-1468).

expression of the *kulalakshmi*'s asexual devotion. Rajlakshmi's embodiment of devotion changes in accordance with her circumstances at different points in the novel; thus, she mobilizes a wifely *satita* to transcend her past as a courtesan, and a godly devotion to overcome her past and her present condition as a *kulalakshmi*, and to aspire towards spiritual salvation.

### Re-conceptualizing *Satita*

I conclude with a question posed at the beginning of this chapter: how does the widow's *satita* fit within nationalist and imperialist narratives of the nation? In her provocative book *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* Tanika Sarkar, following Chatterjee, suggests a nationalist narrative of the nation, in which women's willing participation in conjugality gestures to the superiority of the Hindu nation. She argues that since conjugality was the one relation that most closely resembled colonial arrangements, it became the terrain where nationalists waged war with their colonial masters. They argued that although Hindu conjugality required the complete submission of the wife, her submission was made from love rather than duty, and thus was superior to the unwilling subordination of the Hindu male to his colonial master. The wife's willing subordination, her *satita*, is upheld as an important virtue for the *kulalakshmi* in all the novels examined above. The narrator of *Krishnakanter Uil* praises Bhramar's "sincere childlike love" which is her expression of *satita*, while the narrator of *Chokher Bali* looks askance at Asha's ineptitude at housework, for it suggests that she is incapable of fully realizing wifely *satita*, and the narrator of *Charitraheen* regards Surbala's *satita* as pure and noble, and Surbala as the epitome of the ideal *kulalakshmi*.

Sarkar suggests that just as the wife's devotion made her an example of the superior Hindu nation, the widow also became a symbol for the Hindu nation because of her supreme devotion to her deceased husband, which caused her to willingly

execute the exacting rituals of widowhood. Through these analyses, Sarkar concludes that: “The politics of women’s monogamy then is the condition of the possible Hindu nation: the one is often explicitly made to stand in for the other” (T Sarkar 41).

However, I argue that Sarkar’s account of women’s role in the nation is erroneous because her theory does not account for the *bhadralok* widow. While Sarkar cites examples of *bhadralok* novels in which the female character represents the nation, the female character is always a wife and never a widow. The *bhadralok* novels in which the widow is a protagonist do not explicitly concern the nation and Sarkar therefore does not take them into account.

In her book, on the disappearing figure of the Bengali Muslim woman, Mahua Sarkar suggests that

it is similarly impossible to fully appreciate the disappearing figure of the poor, low-caste, and Muslim women—irrespective of their class positions—in nationalist discourse and its historiography without considering the simultaneous foregrounding indeed celebration, of Hindu middle-class/upper caste women as the *adarsha bhartiya nari* (ideal Indian woman)” (M Sarkar 56).

While Sarkar suggests that class, caste and religion occluded the Bengali Muslim woman from nationalist discourse, I suggest that the widow although upper-caste, middle-class, and a Brahmin, was removed from nationalist discourse, except when she, like the Muslim woman, could be used as a figure of “otherness.”

However, the Bengali widow of *bhadralok* fiction could not be used as symbol of otherness, on which the *bhadralok* novelist could construct the nation (the nation is all that the widow is not) because the widow embodies *satita*, a construct that was familiar but became strange when embodied by the widow. Subjugation to the patriarch was acceptable in *bhadralok* society as long as it was only embodied by the

*kulalakshmi*; however, when the widow characters of these novels usurp *satita* for their own ends they embody the uncanny.<sup>60</sup> As the externalization of their *satita*, the home too becomes a site of the unhomely. Thus Rohini's home embodies her transgressive sexuality, while Binodini's home embodies the transformation of her *satita* from sexual to spiritual, and Rajlakshmi's home becomes a temple. The home thus becomes a site of the indigenous unhomely, rather than the Freudian or Bhabhian unhomely, because it contains all that has been repressed by *bhadralok* society. In other words, it represents *bhadralok* society's alienation from the dichotomies of good and evil that structure *bhadralok* society. While the home in *bhadralok* society was the repository of the spiritual values of the nation, the second home cannot be accounted for within this frame, and its existence therefore ruptures the foundation of *bhadralok* society in the novels. In *Krishnakanter Uil*, Govindlal becomes a criminal and finally an ascetic who is abjected from *bhadralok* society because he has transgressed its norms. Similarly, in *Chokher Bali*, although a chastened Mahendra returns to his ancestral home and his wife, he is not re-integrated into the home as the rightful patriarch. In *Srikanta*, Srikanta is ousted as the patriarch of the household by Rajlakshmi's single-minded pursuit of her spiritual salvation.

While *bhadralok* society could sympathize with the predicament of the widow, they could not tolerate the widow's embodiment of *satita* because it suggested the dissolution of *bhadralok* society. In a letter to Pramatha, his friend and editor, Saratchandra writes about the *bhadralok* reading public's ire on reading the first

---

<sup>60</sup> In *Srikanta*, the widow's ability to realize herself through her *satita* is made explicit in a dialogue between Srikanta and Rajlakshmi on the nature of wifely devotion: "Do you feel no sense of humiliation when you think of yourself as a slave?" "No," Rajlakshmi answered gravely" (Saratchandra 183). Rajlakshmi, like the widows of the other novels, sees her selfhood as inextricably intertwined with her subordination, a quintessentially *bhadralok* notion of devotion. Similarly, both Binodini and Rohini realize their agency by subjugating themselves to Mahendra and Govindlal respectively. All three widow characters sacrifice themselves in their enactment of wifely *satita*; while Rohini sacrifices her reputation to change the forged will with the original one, Binodini undertakes the responsibility of managing the household from Asha, and Rajlakshmi risks her own health to nurse Srikanta back to health time and again.

installment of *Charitraheen*:

[Y]esterday Phoni sent me a telegram saying *Charitraheen* is creating “alarming sensations.” I ask: what is there in it? One upper-middle class girl [Sabitri] for whatever reason is working as a maidservant in a house (character unquestionable—that’s not it) and one upper class man [Satish] falls in love with her—but he is not influenced by anyone to do so. But on the other hand, Robi babu’s [Rabindranath Tagore’s] *Choker Bali* shows a widow [Binodini] from an upper class good family, in her own house, being destroyed by her own relatives and kin and nobody said anything! (Do you remember Rohini in *Krishnakanter Uil?*)” (Saratchandra “Letter to Pramatha, 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1913,” 79)

Saratchandra’s reference to other novels with similar themes suggests that his own narrative simply continued the theme of *satita* that was present in the other novels. He defends his protagonist with reference to the protagonists of other novels; thus, Sabitri is not as culpable as Rohini in her adultery for hers is the pure asexual *satita* of a *kulalakshmi*. However, I suggest that the reading public was enraged because Saratchandra’s novel made explicit the relationship of bondage that characterized the wife’s *satita* to her husband by making his widow protagonist a maidservant who falls in love with her master. In foregrounding bondage, Sabitri’s *satita* became the most explicit rendition of *satita* embodied by a widow protagonist, and therefore as the most unsettling manifestation of the unhomely.

In conclusion, the widow’s sexual-spiritual *satita* defies both imperialist and nationalist narratives of the nation because it is an embodiment of the unhomely. While the imperialist narrative of the nation requires the *bhadralok* widow to represent the helpless brown woman who can be rescued from the barbaric brown man by the benevolent and just white man, the nationalist narrative of the nation requires the

widow to embody an asexual spirituality, which can then be mapped onto the Hindu nation.<sup>61</sup> However, the widow's sexual-spiritual *satita* to a man other than her deceased husband flagrantly violated the notion of victimhood required by the imperial narrative and the norms of conjugal devotion upheld by *bhadralok* society, and therefore cannot be framed within the imperialist or nationalist narratives of the nation.

---

<sup>61</sup> As Jyotsna Singh argues in her book *Colonial Narratives*, “There is some evidence to suggest that colonialism’s benevolent face in the nineteenth century was premised on the assumption that both the British and native women needed to be “rescued” from the native male... And the rescue of women—both British and native—became a synecdoche for the larger premise that the entire Indian culture needed saving from itself, which was an urgent concern of the nineteenth-century civilizing mission to India” (Singh 81-82).

## Inside *Purdah*/ Outside *Purdah*:

### The Veil and the Courtesan in Mirza Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* and Premchand's *Sevasadan*

While in the previous chapter, I focused on the articulation of *satita* by the Bengali widow of *bhadralok* fiction, in this chapter I turn to the marginalized figure of the *tawaif* [courtesan] and her authorized performance of femininity in late-nineteenth-early-twentieth century Urdu/Hindi fiction, namely Mohammed Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* (1899) and Premchand's *Sevasadan* (1917).<sup>62</sup> In this chapter, I argue that just as the upper-caste, Hindu, Brahmin Bengali widow became “other” to the kulalakshmi of *bhadralok* fiction, the *tawaif* of Urdu/Hindi fiction becomes “other” to her *purdah-nasheen* [veiled] counterpart. Thus, just as the Bengali widow embodies *satita* in an attempt to reinstate her place within *bhadralok* society, similarly the *tawaif* performs modes of femininity, such as *sharam* [modesty] and *seva* [service], which are usually restricted to the *purdah-nasheen* woman. Likewise, this performance of femininity becomes a means through which the *tawaif* realizes herself in the context of her social and historical milieu.

The practice of veiling has been the source of much feminist debate. While early feminists condemned it as a practice of extreme sexual control,<sup>63</sup> this view has been challenged by postcolonial feminists,<sup>64</sup> who have argued that the changing

---

<sup>62</sup> Both Urdu and Hindi were one language known as *rekhta* or Hindustani which could be written into two different scripts—Nastaliq(Urdu) and Devnagiri (Hindi). With the building of communal consciousness in the late-nineteenth century they came to be associated with particular religious identities. Urdu was seen to be the language of the Muslims, while Hindi was the language of the Hindus. For more details on the Urdu/Hindi split see Christopher King's *One language, two scripts: The Hindi movement in nineteenth century North India*

<sup>63</sup> “Whereas sexual control is practiced in many societies, *purdah* is an extreme form of sexual control. Apart from concealing women behind veils or keeping them within the walls of the *zenana* (female quarters in the house), *purdah* implied ‘multitudes of complex social arrangements which maintained social...distance between the sexes’” (Engels 15).

<sup>64</sup> As Chandra Mohanty argues in “Under Western Eyes”: “To assume that the mere practice of veiling women in a number of Muslim countries indicates the universal oppression of women through sexual

significations of veiling in different contexts and societies makes it difficult to signify it as a mere symbol of oppression. In Orientalist discourse the veiled woman has often been the subject of fetishistic Orientalist fantasies, in which the veiled woman becomes a metaphor for the opacity of the colony, and both woman and colony must be unveiled by the colonizer in the task of empire.<sup>65</sup> Inderpal Grewal argues that in the South Asian context “The “*pardah*”[veil] construct of the English imperialists becomes the “home” of the Indian nationalists” (Grewal 54), i.e. the opacity of the Indian woman to the Orientalist gaze is what enabled her to preserve her modesty and hence to attain respectability. In the South Asian context, the practice of veiling or *pardah* was common among both Muslims and Hindus. It referred not only to the clothes worn by women, but to a whole system of rules, including separate living quarters for women [known as the *zenana* by Muslims and the *anatarmahal* by Hindus]. The valences of this elaborate form of sexual segregation changed with the evolving national context.

With the Revolt of 1857, South Asian society underwent a seismic shift. While the Muslim elite had been hitherto tolerated and even respected, after the Revolt of 1857, Muslim society came under scrutiny as the British blamed the events of the revolt on the decadent depravity of Muslim culture.<sup>66</sup> In this context, Muslim reformers attempted to reform *sharif* [literally respectable, but usually connoted upper-class, Muslim, feudal] society from within. Two opposing movements were thus formed. The Aligarh movement (1858-1898) spearheaded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan attempted to reform Muslim society by making it more like English society by

---

segregation is not only analytically reductive, but also proves to be quite useless when it comes to the elaboration of oppositional political strategy” (Mohanty 75).

<sup>65</sup> “With modernity comes a new form of institutional power which is based on visibility and transparency and which refuses to tolerate areas of darkness...The veil can be seen as the resisting date or tropology of this modern power whose program aims to construct the world in terms of a transparency provided by knowledge as power” (Yegenoglu 543).

<sup>66</sup> For more details on the subject see Kenneth Jones’s *Socio-religious reform movements in British India*

introducing discipline, order and high levels of education.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, the Deoband movement (1860-1900) was begun by a group of Hanafi *ulema* [scholars] led by Maulana Qasim Nanotwi to initiate an Islamic revival in South Asian society, which they believed had been corrupted by British colonialism.<sup>68</sup> Towards this aim they set up a small Islamic seminary Dar-ul Uloom at Deoband where students could come to learn the core texts of Islam.

Although both schools had opposing philosophies they were curiously united in their views on the “women’s question.” Both Aligarh and Deobandi reformers concurred that women should be taught codes of conduct that would enable them to become better Islamic subjects. The Aligarhists following Sir Syed Ahmed’s lead believed that *purdah-nasheen* women should be educated in both domesticity and religion and to this end wrote didactic novels and moral tracts for them.<sup>69</sup> Prominent among these were Nazir Ahmad’s *Miraat-ul-Uroos* (1869) [The Bride’s Mirror], in which Ahmad outlined the qualities of a virtuous wife through a tale of two sisters and Altaf Hussain Hali’s *Majlis-un-Nissa* (1874) [The Gathering of Women], which laid out appropriate codes of conduct for the *purdah-nasheen* woman. Similarly, the Deobandi *ulema* also set about the task of making women pious subjects through instruction in the codes of Islam.<sup>70</sup> Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi’s *Bhishti Zewar*

---

<sup>67</sup> Sir Syed Ahmad’s disdain for his countrymen’s “native” indifference to their condition was heightened after a visit to Britain. He returned brimming with ideas for reforming Muslim society: “The natives of India...when contrasted with the English in education, manners and uprightness, are like them as a dirty animal is to an able and handsome man” (Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan; quoted in Jones 65). Jones observes in his study of the Aligarh movement’s reformist impetus: “To end this state of decadence Sayyid Ahmad felt that some of the characteristics of English society—its discipline, order, efficiency and high levels of education, along with science and technology—must be adopted by the Muslim community” (Jones 65).

<sup>68</sup> For more on the Deobandi movement see Barbara Metcalf’s *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*.

<sup>69</sup> In his essay “Hindustan ki auraton ki halaat” [The Condition of the Women of Hindustan] Sir Syed Ahmad argues that women have been deprived of “ilm ki roshni” (Ahmad 185) [the light of knowledge], which has been granted to their male counterparts, who have the opportunity to be educated. Sir Syed argued that the education of Muslim women would enable them to become good Muslim subjects.

<sup>70</sup> In her incisive study of Muslim reform movements, Gail Minault suggests that: “their [the Deoband school’s] advocacy of a reformed Islam led the Deoband ulama to champion women’s education in

[Heavenly Ornaments], is a moral guidebook on living a virtuous Islamic life, which soon became a part of every Muslim married woman's trousseau.

This trend in publishing women's guidebooks suggests that appropriate behavior for women was clearly a concern for both Aligarh and Deoband scholars. The Aligarhists were particularly worried that education would make immodest. Therefore, even as they advocated women's education they exhorted women to maintain their modesty by remaining in *purdah* [veiled]. Implicit in this instruction is that the *purdah-nasheen* woman is a symbol of true Muslim culture, and hence preserving her modesty is necessary to the perpetuation of Islamic culture.<sup>71</sup> The *tawaif* or courtesan was pointedly removed from these discussions of education and modesty because as a woman educated in literature, music and the gentle art of conversation, she was by definition immodest.<sup>72</sup> Thus, while the reformers and novelists go into great detail about the education of *purdah-nasheen* women, they desist from defining the role of the *tawaif* in the new Muslim polity except by negation, i.e. the wife is everything the *tawaif* is not: pious, respectable, dignified, and she should thus assert her proper space within the sphere of the home.

Writing within this cultural milieu, Mohammed Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* (1899) depicted a *tawaif* who embodied neither the chaste respectability of the *purdah-nasheen* woman nor the shameless licentiousness of the prostitute, but instead offered a third mode of being separate from the two. The first extant review of *Umrao Jan Ada* claims that the novel is loosely based on G.W.M Reynold's *Rosa Lambert*, in

---

order to suppress many customary practices and to Islamcize women's religious observances" (Minault *Secluded Scholars* 109).

<sup>71</sup> As Gail Minault argues in "Other Voices, Other Rooms: The View from the *Zenana*": "Muslim reformers maintained that women could be educated, competent, free from superstition and backwardness, and still maintain *purdah* and all the respectability and status that veiling implied. They wanted to unveil women's minds, in other words, without unveiling their faces" (Minault 119).

<sup>72</sup> Note that in *Chup ki Daad* (Voices of Silence), Hali exhorts his reader, the *purdah-nasheen* woman, to obtain an education if she wishes to keep her husband at home, for otherwise he was likely to stray into the arms of the educated and therefore alluring *tawaif*.

which a young woman, Rosa Lambert is abducted from her father's house by villains and sold into prostitution.<sup>73</sup> The subsequent events of the narrative delve into the moral dilemmas of its protagonist as Rosa attempts to preserve her "honour" from being sullied at the hands of rogues, dandies and other immoral men but fails to do so. Most of the novel consists of Rosa's reflections on her sorry state, and thus the novel reinstates nineteenth century Victorian morality, even as it provides the reader with lascivious details of Rosa's transgressions.

Like Rosa Lambert, *Umrao Jan Ada* too is the story of a young woman who is abducted from her father's house by villains, but unlike Rosa, Umrao does not bemoan her fate but instead gladly takes to her life as a *tawaif*, delighting in her education in literature, poetry, dance and music. Although Umrao Jan delights in her life as a *tawaif*, like Rosa she too wishes to redeem herself in the eyes of her society. This is not to say that Umrao Jan embodies or is desirous of some Victorian notion of morality, but rather that she desires to be a respectable woman within the context of her own cultural milieu. In other words, I argue that she realizes herself only by performing the restrictive Islamic norms incumbent upon *pardah-nasheen* women, i.e. she attempts to embody *sharam* [modesty], so that she can be considered a legitimate subject of *sharif* society. In what follows, I argue that she utilizes her education in literature and literary form to perform respectability in accordance with *sharif* notions of the same.

Twenty odd years later, Premchand revisits the theme of the *tawaif* estranged from her society in his novel *Sevasadan* (1917). As an avid reader of Urdu literature, Premchand was well-versed with Ruswa's story, but the plot of *Sevasadan* is not a

---

<sup>73</sup> In *In Another Country*, Priya Joshi's incisive study of the circulation of Victorian fiction in the subcontinent, Joshi argues that the Victorian fiction that became popular in the subcontinent was that which was considered "low-brow" by the British literati. Hence, G.W.M. Reynolds' penny dreadfuls were more popular among readers than many a literary novel.

retelling of *Umrao Jan Ada*.<sup>74</sup> Rather, as Premchand himself acknowledges, *Sevasadan* was influenced by William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*.<sup>75</sup> While both novels have female protagonists who turn to a life of prostitution, Suman is no Becky Sharpe. While Becky lives a reckless life of profligacy and thereby becomes the nineteenth-century stereotype of the woman of ill-repute, Suman's characterization is rendered with greater subtlety, for Suman is brought to the realization that she has erred, and hence the narrative allows her space to repent and thus redeem herself in the eyes of her society.

Suman's redemption involves a self-abnegating dedication to *seva* [service] and a willing subjugation to a Gandhian regimen of pain and suffering. She subjects herself to this performance of the nationalist agenda in the hope that it will allow her to become the ideal *bharatiya nari*. *Sevasadan* (1917) was conceived at a time when the nationalist movement of *Satyagraha*, spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi was coming into its own.<sup>76</sup> The term *Satyagraha* literally means an insistence [*agraha*] on the truth [*satya*]. The *Satyagrahi* [the one performing *Satyagraha*] was meant to insist on truth and suffer pain if that was the consequence of insisting on the truth. By her willing suffering the *Satyagrahi* makes herself a visible subject to the other. In other words, the *Satyagrahi* seeks recognition from the other through an ethical encounter with her. As Gandhi writes, "The lesson was indelibly printed on the public mind that the salvation of the people depends upon themselves, upon their capacity for suffering

---

<sup>74</sup> For more details on the contents of Premchand's library and his reading habits see Madan Gopal's *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography*.

<sup>75</sup> "Premchand himself admitted that in writing this novel [*Sevasadan*] his reading of *Vanity Fair* had certainly inspired him, but emphasized that he had neither taken the cue from *Vanity Fair*, nor copied it to any extent whatsoever. 'The outlines of the two bear resemblance, but the two are of very different types'" (Gopal 132).

<sup>76</sup> Gandhi returned to India in 1915 after the Government of South Africa conceded to many of his demands in 1914. In 1916, Home Rule initiated by Annie Beasant was the first nation-wide (the Muslim League had recently joined the Congress after signing the Lucknow Pact) movement of nationalist resistance. Gandhi thus joined nationalist politics when it was beginning to shake the foundations of empire. His philosophy of *Satyagraha* was to be highly influential in the coming years (its first implementation in the subcontinent was the Rowlatt Act of 1919).

and sacrifice” (Gandhi *An Autobiography* 538). Gandhi emphasizes “suffering” and “sacrifice” as the two key elements of *Satyagraha*, and occludes the third element of this equation, i.e. the self. For Gandhi the “self” was important only in its “capacity” to experience suffering and to undertake sacrifices for a larger cause, not in and of itself.

According to Gandhi, women were “naturally” adept at *Satyagraha* because they were inured to lives that were full of suffering, and in his autobiography, Gandhi valorizes his mother Putlibai’s incessant fasting and his wife Kasturba’s ability to maintain celibacy. Although there were many noted nationalist figures who were women, at the grassroots level, the *Satyagraha* of only certain women “counted.” As Kamala Visweswaran argues in “Small Speeches,” the national state and the colonial body only considered upper-caste/class, Hindu women as subjects of nationalist discourse, while occluding the contributions of the lower caste, lower class woman.<sup>77</sup> In this context, Suman occupies a curious position. She was once a respectable woman who fell from favor when she decided to become a *tawaiif*. Although Suman repents and endures suffering and pain and also performs self-abnegation, she can never become the legitimate subject of *Satyagraha*. I suggest that Suman’s performance of *seva* [service] is an attempt to regain respectability by becoming a nationalist subject.

The two novels I examine are separated by almost two decades and by two completely different socio-historical and cultural contexts. However, I read them together not only because they share a common language and have protagonists who are *tawaiifs*, but also because both texts foreground performativity in their enactment

---

<sup>77</sup> “Unmarried women, lower class women, or women who could not otherwise establish respectability—that their lives were ‘no better than other women attending to household duties themselves, without assistance of servants’—might have the labels ‘prostitute’ or ‘paramour’ attached to them, and their political motives were suspect. Indeed, colonial officials often assumed that because such women could not prove respectability, they were undertaking *satyagraha* to gain respectability. This logic resulted in the deliberate selection of middle-class and elite women as nationalist actors” (Visweswaran 89-90).

of gender roles. I take here Judith Butler's understanding of gender as performance:

Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (Butler 519).

Building upon Judith Butler's understanding of gender, I suggest that the *tawaiifs* of these novels perform prescribed modes of femininity in the hope of creating a "substance" that will be coherent with the norms of their society. In other words, since the *tawaiifs* of these novels utilize modes of performance from their profession as *tawaiifs* to distance themselves from their profession, their performance of respectability is necessarily an attempt to make seamless acts which are "internally discontinuous."

Drawing on Butler's notion of gender and performance, Saba Mahmood similarly argues that the women involved in the Mosque movement realize themselves as pious subjects, by treating "socially authorized forms of performance as the potentialities—the ground if you will—through which the self is realized" (Mahmood 31). I argue, however, that the protagonists of the novels I examine, enact "socially authorized performances" of femininity differently from the women of the mosque movement because while submission to the norms of Islam is a choice of one subject-position among many others for the women involved in the mosque movement, the *tawaiifs* of these novels have been actively denied the particular modes of inhabiting femininity that they see as enabling their self-realization. Hence, when they inhabit this femininity they are at once rebelling against their inscription in the social role of the *tawaiif* as well as conforming to the norms of another social role, that of the respectable woman, variously defined as the *pardah-nasheen* woman and the

*bharatiya nari*.

While for the women of the mosque movement the enactment of piety takes place within the socially and culturally sanctioned space of the mosque, the *tawaiif*'s performance of femininity is intertwined with the spatial politics of *sharif* society. In his essay "Gender and the Politics of Space" Faisal Devji explains that the notion of *pardah* in Muslim society was a product of the over-eroticization of the female body: "The body of the *zaiif* [lit. weak-here used for women] was eroticized to such an extent that the woman, for instance, came to be commonly described as a living sexual organ (*awrat*) which had to be hidden..." (Devji 145). He argues further that within the context of nineteenth-century reform movements, the notion of *pardah* changed significantly. It moved from being a symbol of the erotic power of women to a symbol of women's seclusion. In other words, the *pardah* served to seclude women from the corrupting influences of colonialism, and also thereby to render her into a "guardian of orthodoxy" (Devji 151), who could preserve Muslim culture for the Muslim man.<sup>78</sup>

Within this context, the *kotha* [brothel] took on the eroticized elements of the *zenana* and thus became the socially sanctioned counterpoint to the women's quarters of the respectable home. Thus while the Bengali widow of the *bhadralok* novel inhabits a second home, which becomes the counterpoint to the ancestral home, the *tawaiif*'s location in the *kotha* does not upset the balance of *sharif* society because it is already outside of it. However, even though both Umrao and Suman move away from the *kotha* and establish a home of respectability for themselves, within the text, this home can only occupy a space at the margins of *sharif* society because its entrance into *sharif* society would radically destabilize the social division between *zenana* and *kotha*.

---

<sup>78</sup> As Mahua Sarkar notes, the practice of *pardah* was not restricted to Muslim society, but became widespread as a cultural practice among Hindus, as well, where it took on similar connotations.

## I

The Urdu novel of the late-nineteenth century was deeply influenced by the *dastan*<sup>79</sup> tradition that preceded it, and thus Sarshar's *Fasana-e Azad* is bursting with fairies, magicians and monsters and characters who perform impossible tasks. Conversely, another trend in the Urdu novel was the moral didacticism of writers like Nazeer Ahmed and Altaf Hussain Hali. In this milieu, Mohammed Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada*, was sensational not only because of its content, but also because of its unique narrative style, which aimed at realism without slipping into moral didacticism. In the preface to his novel *Zat-e-Sharif*, Mirza Ruswa self-consciously draws attention to his attempt to break away from the work of his literary predecessors, "I do not possess the inventive power to delineate events that happened thousands of years ago. Besides, I consider it improper to portray a picture which agrees neither with present day conditions nor with those of the past" (Asaduddin 92).<sup>80</sup>

The novel *Umrao Jan Ada* is a fictionalized biography of the *tawaiif* Umrao Jan, who narrates the events of her life to an interlocutor, Mirza Ruswa.<sup>81</sup> In the course of the novel we learn that she is a poet of some renown herself and takes on the *takhallus* [pen-name] 'Ada' or coquetry. The novel has a loose episodic narrative structure in which we learn of Umrao Jan's affairs with various men as well as about the affairs of her sister *tawaiifs* Bismillah Jan and Khurshid Jan. It ends with Umrao

---

<sup>79</sup> The word *dastan* literally means "story" in Persian, and is used to refer to a genre of storytelling which began in Iran, but soon spread to other parts of the Muslim world. In the Urdu literary tradition, the *dastan* was used to refer specifically to stories that included elements of the mythic and fantastic.

<sup>80</sup> Critics have misread Ruswa's commitment to realist fiction as a commitment to portraying factual events. Thus, there has been much debate in Urdu literary circles about whether Umrao Jan was indeed based on a real woman by the same name or not; while this is a fascinating historical question it is irrelevant for reading this novel as a literary text.

<sup>81</sup> Hereafter I will refer to him as Mirza Ruswa to distinguish him from the author, Mohammed Hadi Ruswa.

Jan abandoning the life of the *tawaif* and living as a respectable woman of modest means.

In what follows I argue that although a *tawaif* whose business requires her to be at the center of the male gaze, Umrao Jan uses her education in literature and literary form to maintain her modesty, and to thereby align herself with her veiled counterpart, the *pardah-nasheen* woman of *sharif* society. More specifically, Umrao Jan uses the normative male voice of the *ghazal* [a mono-rhymed lyric poem] to dispel the assumption that as a *tawaif* she writes lewd and licentious poetry to allure men. In addition, she mobilizes the poetic registers of the *ghazal* to create a veil of words to shield herself from the male gaze and to thereby maintain her modesty.

As a *tawaif*, the restrictions incumbent upon *pardah-nasheen* women such as limited physical mobility, partial access to the public sphere and restricted interaction with men do not apply to Umrao Jan. By creating a metaphorical veil, Umrao Jan re-invokes these rules of *pardah* for herself. In doing so, she not only forsakes the freedom given to her by *sharif* society but also the wealth that could accrue to her if she simply inhabited her role as a *tawaif*. Hence, although an outsider to *sharif* society, Umrao Jan desires to embody its norms of respectability. However, because she cannot fully become a *pardah-nasheen* woman, nor can she fully inhabit the persona of the *tawaif*, Umrao Jan occupies a liminal space between the *zenana* and the *kotha*.

Asserting a male presence: The Politics of *rekhta*

Literary critic C.M. Naim argues that premodern poetry in the subcontinent could be divided into three traditions: the Persian tradition, in which poets adopted a male persona to express desire for other men; the Indic tradition in which poets

adopted a female persona to express desire for men; and lastly, the Urdu tradition in which poets adopted a male persona to express desire for women.<sup>82</sup> This last became the standard register for Urdu poetry in the subcontinent and poetry so composed was called *rekhta*. In the early nineteenth-century another genre of poetry called *rekhti* was popularized by male Urdu writers. It referred to the adoption of a female voice and the poems written in this genre were usually lewd, licentious accounts of the private affairs of women. This poetry was crudely realistic and was used to convey the sexual experiences of women. It had none of the nuances or symbolism of the *ghazal*. In her essay on *rekhti*, Carla Petievich argues that *rekhti* belittled women by representing their experiences in ribald and licentious terms and by creating poems in a conversational Urdu register, which far differed from the formal register of *rekhta*. However, serious Urdu poets, both male and female, from the eighteenth century onwards, only composed poetry in *rekhta*, and *rekhti* came to be associated primarily with the *begumati zaban* [women's language] of prostitutes.<sup>83</sup>

Within this socio-cultural milieu, Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* would be read as a novel in the genre of *rekhti*, not only because its protagonist is a prostitute but because the novel is narrated from her perspective, i.e. the novel adopts a first person female narratorial voice. However, I argue that the novel *Umrao Jan Ada* moves away from the genre of *rekhti* by establishing its protagonist as a serious *rekhta* composing poet.

---

<sup>82</sup> "In the "Persian" mode, the poet used a masculine voice for himself, and addressed a beloved who could be male or female. (This mode later gained exclusive dominance in the Urdu ghazal in all parts of India.) In the "Indic" mode, on the other hand, the poet/lover adopted a feminine voice for himself, while addressing a beloved who was always male" (Naim 6). For more details on this see C.M. Naim's "Transvestic Words: The *Rekhti* in Urdu."

<sup>83</sup> "It was into this milieu that *rekhti* was introduced by Sa'adat Yar Khan 'Rangin' (1756-1834), the son of a Persian nobleman who had migrated to Lucknow around the turn of the nineteenth century. By way of introduction to his literary innovation, Rangin explains that, in the course of a wild and mis-spent youth, he consorted extensively with the famous courtesans of the day. In their company he developed familiarity with and appreciation of their particular idiom. The pithiness of their expression and their wit so impressed him that he decided to compose poetry in this 'Ladies' Language' (*begumati zaban*) and to call his collected poems '*rekhti*'. The combination of its feminine narrator and its *begumati* idiom made *rekhti* a distinct genre. Indications are that this immediately-popular style of poetry was accepted quite unproblematically into Lucknow's thriving milieu" (Petievich 78).

Umrao Jan self-consciously performs *rekhta* to establish herself as a serious poet and thereby asserts her literary presence within a primarily male-dominated literary milieu. However, since her assertion of a literary presence could be construed as immodest by her largely male audience, she aligns herself with the Islamic codes of the Aligarh/Deoband movement through her poetic compositions.

The novel starts with a *mushaira* [poetry gathering], in which a group of men gather to recite poetry. Mirza Ruswa, the narrator, is among them and he recites a *shair* (a mono-rhymed couplet) to the acclaim of his male audience. Umrao Jan overhears him and exclaims her approval, but does not show herself. When urged by the others to join their party, Umrao Jan refuses and explains her refusal to Ruswa, “I couldn’t help myself shouting out in praise. I heard someone calling me to join you, but modesty forbade me. I thought it better to keep silent, but finally I was unable to restrain myself” (Ruswa xvii). The alternation between silence and voice represents the tension between Umrao Jan’s role as a *tawaif* which allows her to be a connoisseur of poetry and enables her to be a speaking subject, and her desire to conform to the norms of “modesty” incumbent upon the *pardah-nasheen* woman.<sup>84</sup>

In the novel, this conflict between voice and silence is resolved through an innovative narrative strategy. Ruswa deploys a layered first-person narratorial voice to give primacy to his protagonist’s experiences and to establish her agency as a speaking subject, but uses a narrator as an interlocutor for her, to shield her from the direct gaze of the reader. Umrao Jan’s narrative voice is thus doubly mediated—first by Ruswa the author and then by Mirza Ruswa the narrator. She is thus shielded from the direct gaze of the reader, who is also imagined as male, given the context of late-nineteenth century *sharif* society, in which the existence of reform movements to promote

---

<sup>84</sup> The modest woman was one who knew how to keep her own counsel. For instance, Nazir Ahmad’s *Miraat-ul-Uroos* clearly suggests that Ashgari was an excellent wife and homemaker because she was quiet, soft-spoken and maintained the decorum necessary for a woman of the *zenana*.

women's education suggests that the reading public was largely comprised of men, who had access to education. While an increasing number of women were getting access to education, their education was limited to religious texts and didactic novels. In this context, the contemporary reader of Ruswa's reader would necessarily be male. In signifying the reader as male, the novel's narrative strategy fuses the violating male gaze of Umrao Jan's audience with the gaze of the imagined reader, who too threatens to unveil Umrao Jan through his scopophilic gaze.

In addition to this mediated narrative voice, which shields Umrao Jan from the accusation of speaking *rekhti*, the novel is also at pains to differentiate Umrao Jan's poetry from the genre of *rekhti*. As a *tawaif*, Umrao Jan is called upon by her audience to recite a *shair* [a mono-rhymed couplet], which she does after much hesitation. The *shair* that she recites adopts *rekhta* or the normative male voice:

*Kaabe main jaa ke bhool gaya raah der ka*

*Eeman bach gaya mere maula ne kher ki* (Ruswa *Umrao Jan Ada* 're')

On my visit to the Ka'aba I forgot the road to the Church<sup>85</sup>

My faith was saved (because) my Lord was merciful

In response to this poem, Khan Sahab, one of the connoisseurs of poetry present, asks Umrao Jan why she refers to herself as a male in the verse. An incensed Umrao Jan asks Khan Sahab whether he thinks she is only capable of composing *rekhti*. Khan Sahab responds by saying that only *rekhti* befits a woman. Khan Sahab's attempt to pigeon-hole Umrao Jan into a *rekhti* composing poet on account of her gender and her profession meets with hostility from Umrao Jan because she considers herself a serious poet, and as a serious poet she naturally assumes the normative male voice in her poetic compositions. Her assumption of the normative male voice may strike a

---

<sup>85</sup> I use the English translation when I think it adequately conveys the meaning of the Urdu/Hindi, and I undertake my own translation when I think that the translator hasn't sufficiently unpacked the nuances of the Urdu/Hindi.

modern reader as a perplexing desire to assimilate into a male identity, but as suggested above, the adoption of a male voice was a common practice among both male and female Urdu poets of the eighteenth century onwards.<sup>86</sup>

In his essay “Conventions of Love,” Shamsur Rehman Faruqi argues that taking their cue from Sanskrit literature, *ghazal* composers within the Indic tradition theorized a split between *mazmun* and *ma’ni* or the subject and the meaning of a *ghazal* [mono-rhymed lyric poem]:

The recognition of the poem being splittable in “What is it about?” [*mazmun*] and “What does it mean?” [*ma’ni*] meant that the poet could assume any persona—now it was not, for instance, Vali the person, who was speaking in the poem, but there was a voice, and Vali the poet was only the articulator of that voice (Faruqi “Conventions of Love” 6).

The *ghazal* was thus not lyric poetry in the Romantic sense, i.e. it was not a Wordsworthian “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” but rather a self-conscious articulation of a poetic voice. In the verse above, the poetic voice is definitively masculine, not only because Umrao Jan uses a masculine verb ending to signify the speaking subject, but also because the *mazmun* of the verse is Islamic piety: a visit to the Ka’aba re-instills the speaker’s faith in Islam, and makes him forget the Church, which in the verse is a metonym for the proselytizing mission of Christian missionaries, who attempted to convert the masses to Christianity at this historical moment.<sup>87</sup> Just as the Ka’aba re-inducts the Muslim man into the fold of Islam, in the same way, the Muslim man re-Islamizes the Muslim woman through his careful

---

<sup>86</sup> This has indeed been the assumption in literary analyses of the novel. In her analysis of the feminist poetics that animate *Umrao Jan Ada*, Sukrita Paul Kumar attributes Umrao’s desire to speak *rekhta* as a sign of her subjugation to male discourse: “Though Umrao herself is a woman and poet in her own right, her assertion that she would not want to write in the feminine idiom or language, shows how she has internalized the male poetic conventions and assumptions, accepting male hegemony of language” (Kumar 35).

<sup>87</sup> In the verse the visit to the Ka’aba is metonymic for the Hajj, an act incumbent upon every devout Muslim.

guidance and support.

As Faisal Devji argues, the Muslim man threatened by colonialism sought to re-establish his sovereignty by re-Islamizing the world of the *zenana*, for the anxiety surrounding Muslim manhood could only be countered by “hegemonically incorporating the youth and the woman into the new *sharif* polity by education or Islamization” (Devji 150). Thus, the male speaker of Umrao Jan’s verse becomes an agent for the larger project of Islam-izing the women’s quarters. In assuming this male poetic voice, Umrao Jan aligns herself with the ideals of the Aligarh/Deoband movements, and in doing so, she insinuates herself in the codes of conduct that defined the *sharif* Muslim male’s relationship to the *zenana*.

#### The Public as Private: Education and the Politics of Modesty

In his essay, “Gender and the Politics of Space” Faisal Devji cogently argues that prior to colonialism, the public was the space for Islam, but with the advent of colonial rule, the public was characterized by secularism. Consequently, Islam had to move into the sphere of the private, which had hitherto been marked as pagan. Thus, as argued above, the Aligarh/Deobandi movements were characterized by an anxiety to re-Islamize the private sphere of the *zenana* through education, so that *pardah-nasheen* women could retain the core values of Islam, which were being eroded in the public. In this section, I argue that although a *tawaif* who is part of the public sphere, Umrao Jan self-consciously enfolds herself in the sphere of the private by following the conservative educational curricula and the concomitant norms set out by the Aligarh and Deobandi reformers.

As discussed above, the reformers created several moral tracts outlining the education of women. According to most reformers a knowledge of the *Quran* and of household chores was all the education a *pardah-nasheen* woman needed to be a good

companion for her husband and a good mother to her children. From the perspective of the reformers, *purdah* not only shielded women from the gaze of the public, but it also enabled them to “to ‘save’ men from the wickedness of the public” (Devji 151). This argument is similar to that made by Bengali nationalists, who suggested that as the repository of an asexual spirituality, the upper-caste, middle-class Hindu woman protected the *bhadralok* male from the vicissitudes of the colonial encounter.<sup>88</sup>

As repositories of asexual spirituality, both Hindu and Muslim women were expressly forbidden from reading material that was not morally edifying. Just as the respectable Hindu woman was supposed to confine her reading to the scriptures and women’s magazines, the educational curriculum for the *purdah-nasheen* woman was equally circumscribed. The reformers unanimously agreed that Persian tales of romance such as *Laila-Mejnun* and *Alif-Laila* were most unsuitable for *purdah-nasheen* women because they were likely to give women fanciful ideas about love and romance, and no *purdah-nasheen* woman should be so immodest as to fall in love, for an Islamic marriage was based on a clear demarcation of gender roles and did not need anything as frivolous as love to be successful.

As a *tawaif* Umrao Jan is educated in Persian tales of romance, but she disparages the love portrayed in these tales as fanciful and wholly unnecessary:

Men and women do love each other, but in love there is often an element of self-interest. Selfless love like that of Laila and Majnu, Shirin and Farhad, only exists in tales. People say that love cannot be one sided. I have even seen this

---

<sup>88</sup> Ironically, in Hindu nationalist discourse, the Hindu woman was painted as modern, progressive and secular while her Muslim counterpart was depicted as traditional and backward. As Mahua Sarkar argues: “By the early twentieth-century, then, the combination of outright silence, overtly unflattering representation, and oblique, negative allusions seems to have consolidated a picture of Muslim women as the “inherently atavistic” other of the “ideal modern woman” (Hindu, middle class and upper caste) in the contemporary popular Hindu imagination. Indeed, it is in the *figure of the traditional woman*—silenced and victimized by the barbarity of Muslim men—that Muslim women make one of their few appearances in the Hindu dominated nationalist discourse of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Bengal” (Sarkar 74).

with my own eyes, but I think we must regard it as a kind of aberration. And why should it be necessary for men and women to be crazy (Ruswa *Umrao Jan Ada* 56-57)?

In this exposition on love, Umrao Jan dismisses the undying love of Laila-Majnu Shirin and Farhad as the stuff of fiction, which does not manifest itself in the real world. Thus, when she is required to profess undying love to her client she does so, but regards it simply as a performance necessary for her profession. From her own experience in the business of love, she regards love as an “aberration,” a frivolous pursuit wholly unnecessary for a successful marriage or in her case, a successful liaison with a client. In both instances, her rhetoric echoes that of the Aligarh/Deobandi reformers for whom love was a madness that infected both sexes and made them “crazy.”

In disavowing love, Umrao Jan aligns herself with the ideological dimensions of the reformers’ educational curricula. However, her disavowal of love does not necessarily mean that she also embodies the appropriate norms of modesty required by the educated *pardah-nasheen* woman. As Gail Minault observes, both Sir Sayyad and Nazir Ahmad “view an educated woman as a potential source of ethical guidance, discipline and revitalized faith. Neither feels it necessary to abolish *pardah* as the source of women’s isolation, since the world can be brought into the *zenana* via education” (Minault *Secluded Scholars* 36). Latent in Minault’s observation is the fact that *pardah* made it possible for women to be educated in Islam, for without *pardah* women too were susceptible to the onslaught of colonialism. Thus *pardah* enabled respectable women to be educated but to still maintain their modesty. However, as an educated “public” woman who is not in *pardah* and freely interacts with men, Umrao Jan is susceptible to the accusation of immodesty.

In the narrative, Mirza Ruswa acts as a mouthpiece for this perspective when

he presses Umrao Jan to reveal the intimate details of her life to him. This request presumes that as an educated woman and a *tawaif* Umrao Jan falls outside of the prescriptions incumbent on women of the *zenana*. However, in accordance with the norms incumbent upon a *pardah-nasheen* woman, Umrao Jan has Ruswa promise that he will not make public her memoirs and thereby disgrace her: “‘Ah the disgrace! God preserve us! Will you make me as notorious as yourself? The very pen-name you’ve chosen [Ruswa] is a word meaning “disgraced”’” (Ruswa *Umrao Jan Ada* 37). Umrao Jan’s play on the word “disgrace” suggests her intelligence and her wit, her ability to parry with words, which suggests also her education. Her education, then, does not make her immodest (read: aggressive and loud), but rather enables her to shield herself from the public gaze, and hence re-institutes the codes of *pardah-nasheen* women.

The story of Umrao Jan’s interaction with Mirza Ruswa does not end with the conclusion of *Umrao Jan Ada*, but rather continues on in another novel entitled *Junun-e-Intezar ya’ni Fasana-e-Mirza Ruswa* [*The Madness of Waiting: The story of Mirza Ruswa*] supposedly authored by Umrao Jan herself, but in reality published by M.H. Ruswa as an April fool’s joke to capitalize on the success of his novel *Umrao Jan Ada*.<sup>89</sup> In this novella, Umrao Jan tells her audience that Ruswa has disgraced her by publishing the memoirs of her life without her permission, and that the following text is an attempt to avenge herself. Naturally, being a poet of some renown she frames her threat in poetic terms:

*Dushnaam dey key mujhko buhut khush na ho jaiyey*

*Kiaa keejyey aap jo meri zubaan khulee* (Ruswa *Junun-e-Intezaar* 1)

Be not too contented, having cursed me just so,

What would you do, if my tongue had been a bit looser like yours?

---

<sup>89</sup> The novella is published on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1899.

In this verse, Umrao Jan states that Mirza Ruswa has “cursed” her by publishing her story because he has made public the intimate details of her life and in doing so has ruined her reputation. This is made more explicit in the next verse when she threatens to avenge herself by “loosening her tongue,” i.e. by revealing the intimate details of Mirza Ruswa’s life. Umrao Jan claims to have come upon the intimate details of Mirza Ruswa’s private life in a *mathnavi* called *Naala-e-Ruswa* [The Lament of Ruswa], in which Mirza Ruswa narrates the story of his love affair with Sophia, an Anglo-French woman who eventually abandons him and leaves for Paris.

The text of *Junun-e-Intezaar* is for the most part the text of the *mathnavi Naala-e-Ruswa* with occasional interjections by Umrao Jan. In these interjections, Umrao Jan reminds the reader time and again that she is revealing private information about Mirza Ruswa’s life, which he would rather not have made public.<sup>90</sup> In doing so, she overlays Mirza Ruswa’s narrative voice with her own, and thereby subtly undermines his authority as the author of the text. Through this move, Umrao Jan establishes herself as a speaking subject who defends herself against her public humiliation at the hands of Mirza Ruswa. However, the layered narrative structure of this text shields her from the direct gaze of the reader through the elaborate artifice of the *mathnavi*, for it is not her but the *mathnavi* which exposes the intimate details of Mirza Ruswa’s life. Once again, the voice of the speaking subject Umrao Jan, is modulated by Mirza Ruswa the narrator of *Umrao Jan Ada*, who is now also a character in this story. Therefore, through this text, Umrao Jan defends herself against accusations of immodesty both through her own textual interjections and through the narrative structure of the text itself.

---

<sup>90</sup> “Ever since he decided to publish my biography, I vowed that I would reveal a few of his secrets to the world” (Ruswa *Junun-e-Intezaar* 1)

## Beguiling Men: The performance of love

In *Chup ki Dad* [Voices of Silence], Aligarh reformer Maulana Altaf Hussain Hali exhorts *pardah-nasheen* women to gain an education if they wish to keep their husbands, for a man was more likely to stray into the arms of a *tawaif* if his wife was uneducated:

You should consider the man a thirsty traveler and the woman a spring. If the spring happens to be located in the shade of a tree and there is greenery all around and a nice cool breeze, then the traveler, after quenching his thirst, will want to spend several hours enjoying the environment. There may be plenty of other springs which do not have such a pleasant atmosphere where he would simply quench his thirst and go his way (Hali 63).

Although the *tawaif* is not explicitly mentioned here, the “spring” surrounded by “greenery” and a “cool breeze” is an elaborate metaphor for the *tawaif* and her charms. In the culture of late-nineteenth century Lucknow, the courtesan usually attracted a client through her beauty, her artistic and literary accomplishments, or through her mastery over the fine art of conversation. These accomplishments created a “pleasant atmosphere” for men who were seeking intellectual companionship, and a client maintained a *tawaif* for the pleasure of her company.

Hali urges the *pardah-nasheen* woman to garner an education because the relationship between client and *tawaif* was akin to the relationship between husband and wife since both relationships were characterized by fidelity and often a life time of companionship. What differentiated these relationships was that while marriage was a duty incumbent upon every Muslim man, the relationship between a *tawaif* and her client was a pleasurable choice entered into at will by both parties and was premised on the notion of love rather than of duty. However, I argue that although a *tawaif* whose business is love Umrao Jan follows the norms set out for *pardah-nasheen*

women by performing love without falling in love herself.

The notion of the *tawaif*'s love as a performance is explicated early on in the novel. Umrao Jan prefaces chapter five, in which she describes the *missi* [initiation] ceremonies of her sister *tawaifs* Bismillah Jan, Amir Jan and Khurshid Jan, with the following *shair*:

*Hum naheen un main jo padh lete haiN tote ki tarah*

*Maktab-e-ishq o wafa tajurba amoos bhi tha* ( Ruswa Umrao Jan Ada 22)

We are not of those who merely repeat what they hear

(Lessons from) the school of love and faith have to be experienced

The verse stages the tension between the knowledge of love and the experience of love through the metaphor of the classroom. In the first line of verse, a *tota* or parrot is depicted as the ignorant student who merely memorizes what is taught to her and faithfully reproduces it without actually learning anything. Similarly, the *tawaif* who merely memorizes the lessons of love from novels and manuals will not go very far. In the second line, the metaphor of the classroom is extended by the noun “maktab” [school], which imparts lessons of love and faith. This choice of noun, I argue, foregrounds the *tawaif*'s knowledge of love as learnt, an acquired craft honed through extensive experience rather than a natural response to the emotion of love. This then gestures to artifice involved in the *tawaif*'s declaration of love, which becomes a staged encounter between the *tawaif* and her client.

Umrao Jan makes explicit the artifice inherent in the performance of love, which *tawaifs* use to beguile clients:

I have followed the profession of a courtesan, and there is a saying about people like us that when we wish to pull a man into our net, we die for him...Heaving long sighs, weeping and beating our breasts...these are all tricks of the trade. No man however hard-hearted can escape from our wiles,

but I can tell you truthfully that I have never really been in love with anyone nor anyone with me” (Ruswa *Umrao Jan Ada* 83-84).

Umrao Jan here explicitly foregrounds the *tawaif*'s love as a performance, and in the course of the narrative, we encounter several such performances by Bismillah Jan, Umrao Jan's sister *tawaif*, who manages to garner much money and fame through her declarations of love. Once again, Umrao Jan differentiates herself from her sister *tawaifs* by refusing to use these tricks to beguile men, and choosing to use the *ghazal* instead. More specifically, I argue that through her mastery over the literary form of the *ghazal* Umrao Jan creates a veil [*purdah*] of words in her poetic compositions which profess love to a beloved without meaning it. In other words, she utilizes the tension between *mazmun* [subject] and *ma'ni* [meaning] present in the literary tradition of the *ghazal* to perform love without actually ever falling in love herself and thus maintains her modesty.

As Faruqi argues, for masters of the *ghazal* like the eighteenth-century poet Mir Taqi Mir, “the accomplishment of poetry conceals, throws a veil over the real utterance, or speech, or poetry, which remains unheard and unrevealed. Poetry veils the true utterance, and dissembling is the true art of the poet” (Faruqi “The Poet in the Poem” 187). Faruqi here gestures to Mir's deployment of the tension between *mazmun* and *ma'ni* in his *ghazals*. For while the subject [*mazmun*] of the *ghazal* could be love professed to a young boy it did not necessarily mean [*ma'ni*] that the poet was professing love to a young boy.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, just as the poet becomes a master of his craft by “dissembling,” so too does the courtesan perfect her craft by dissembling love. While the poet uses *sukhan* or words to conceal meaning, Umrao Jan uses the

---

<sup>91</sup> In *Nets of Awareness*, Frances Pritchett argues that the advent of colonial rule radically changed the Urdu literary milieu. Urdu literary critics such as Hali urged Urdu writers to abandon the highly stylized registers of the *ghazal* in favour of poetry that was the outcome of a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.” They suggested that poets abandon the subject of unrequited love and create poetry about nature, instead. However, despite their best efforts, the tradition of the *ghazal* persisted in the Urdu literary milieu and continues to flourish even today.

performance of love to conceal her self. I argue that she conflates the performance of love with the performative aspect of the *ghazal* by self-consciously using the *mazmun* of the *ghazal*, love, to both compose poetry and make men fall in love with her.

In her first public performance as an entertainer, Umrao Jan stages her performance of love through a *ghazal*, whose *mazmun-e-sukhan* [the subject of utterance] is coquetry. The speaker of the *ghazal* [the lover] expresses her trials and tribulations because she has fallen in love with an indifferent beloved. While this *mazmun* is common to the *ghazal* tradition, in the context of the *mujra* [performance] it explicates the dynamic between the *tawaif* and her client: she must perform love to gain a client. In what follows I examine three *shairs*, each of which gestures to an aspect of the *tawaif*'s performance of love:

*haal-e dil un se na kehna tha humaiN chuuk gayey*

*ab koi baat banaayeN bhee tou kiasa hota hai* (Ruswa Umrao Jan Ada 42)

I was not to tell him the state of my heart, but alas I erred

Now even if I were to make up something, what of it?

In this verse, Umrao Jan explicates a game inherent in the performance of love. Here the game assumes the form of hide and seek, in which the lover must hide her feelings to gain her beloved. The foolish beloved confesses her love and now she cannot retract it no matter what she says instead. In another verse of the same *ghazal*, Umrao Jan explicates a game of love that is the converse of the game described above. Here, the *tawaif* professes undying love to her client so that he may fall in love with her:

*ishq maiN hasrat-e dil ka tou nikalna kaisa*

*dam nikalne maiN bhee kambakht maza hota hai* (Ruswa Umrao Jan Ada 42)

What say of the pleasures of fulfilled desires

In love, there is pleasure even in dying!

The verse establishes the artifice embedded in the performance of love in its use of the

verb “*nikalna*,” [literally, to leave] which in the first line is used to mean “fulfillment” and in the second line is used to mean “dying.” By utilizing the same verb to signify both fulfillment and death, the verse suggests that love is only complete when it manifests itself as a desire for death without the beloved. Thus, the game in this verse is played out as a performance of undying love. Umrao Jan confesses this in the poetic composition, but as discussed above, the distance between *mazmun* and *ma’ni* in the *ghazal*, implies that she merely articulates undying love, but that she is not necessarily implicated in it.

Umrao Jan foregrounds the performativity of the game of love in another verse of the same *ghazal* in which the *tawaif* self-consciously uses coquetry or “*ada*” to make her beloved fall in love with her:

*phir nazar jheep tee hai aankh jhukee jaati hai*

*dekhyey dekhyey phir teer khata hota hai* (Ruswa *Umrao Jan Ada* 42)

Then she bashfully averts her gaze and lowers her eyes

Lo and Behold! The arrow misses its target

The *tawaif* bashfully averts her gaze, a coquettish gesture designed to make the beloved fall in love with her. This coquettish gesture is layered in this verse with the metaphor of glances as arrows. Within the *ghazal* tradition, the beloved’s eyes are usually likened to arrows because they have the power to wound her lover. However, in this verse there is a subtle deviation from the standard form: here it is the lover [the *tawaif*] who aims potent arrows at her beloved, but the arrows fall shy of him and he remains immune to her charms. In foregrounding the *mazmun* [subject] of the *shair*, i.e. coquetry, as an artifice, the *shair* merges the performance of love with the performativity of the *ghazal*.

Umrao Jan’s performance of the *ghazal* thus reveals her complicated relationship with her society and her sexuality. As a *tawaif* she is expected to trade

love for money, but instead she trades the performance of love for money. This transaction then removes her from the economy of her body and allows her to embody the Aligarhist notion of modesty. However, despite embodying the norms incumbent upon *purdah-nasheen* women she is unable to fully become integrated within *sharif* society.

Between *Zenana* and *Kotha*: The predicament of the “modest” *tawaif*

It is true that prostitutes are known for their candid speech, but there is a time and a place for everything. It is all a matter of one’s age. Things that are said with exaggeration in the first flush of youth should lose their significance with passing years, and a kind of balance should be struck. After all, prostitutes are women as well (Ruswa *Umrao Jan Ada* 36).

In this aside, Umrao Jan creates a dichotomy between her role as a prostitute and her existence as a woman. I argue that this split of identities lies at the heart of the novel: to be a woman for Umrao Jan means to be a respectable woman. By extension, Umrao Jan cannot simultaneously be a prostitute and a woman or rather she can only be a woman when she is not a prostitute. In this section I argue that Umrao Jan can successfully enact the role of the “prostitute” and the “respectable woman” only because she emphasizes her liminal position in each role.

Drawing on Butler’s work on gender and performativity, I read Umrao’s performance of these roles as an act which “constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted” (Butler 520). In other words, Umrao’s act of respectability both constitutes respectability within the norms of *sharif* society, and is at the same time a performance of respectability from her vantage point as a prostitute. Similarly, Umrao Jan’s mode of performing these acts is drawn from her profession as a *tawaif*, and hence it is at once constitutive of her identity as a *tawaif* and at the same

time an enactment of it. I argue that Umrao Jan performs this curious role play because she cannot belong to either world. Like the Bengali widow who exists in a liminal space between home and the world, Umrao Jan too exists in a liminal space between *zenana* and *kotha* and internally between the *tawaif* and the *pardah-nasheen* woman.

In the novel, Ruswa foregrounds Umrao's inhabitation of these two roles by contrasting her character and story with that of Bismillah Jan, a prostitute in the same establishment, and with that of Ram Pyari, a respectable woman. As Khanum Jan's protégés both Bismillah Jan and Umrao Jan are given the same education and treatment, but Umrao Jan far excels Bismillah Jan in her literary and artistic accomplishments. However, in the novel, Bismillah Jan, rather than Umrao Jan is depicted as the prototypical *tawaif* because even though Bismillah Jan does not write poetry or sing as well as Umrao, she excels in exercising coquetry. In doing so, she aligns herself with her sister *tawaifs*, who "had such authority that even if heaven and earth would move, their word was law. Why talk of their demands? Without being asked people would give their hearts to them, offer up their very spirit and sacrifice their souls" (Ruswa *Umrao Jan Ada* 40). In this exposition, Umrao Jan describes the *tawaif's* profession as premised on the exercise of coquetry, which requires demanding hearts only to then break them. In contrast even though a *tawaif*, Umrao Jan desists from using the techniques of her sister *tawaifs* and chooses instead to exercise coquetry through her knowledge of poetry, as discussed above, and in doing so self-consciously positions herself as an outsider to the norms of the *kotha*.

However, Umrao Jan does not belong to the world of the *zenana* either. In the novel, the world of the *zenana* is represented by the character of Ram Pyari. When kidnapped as child, Umrao Jan was confined in a room with another young girl, Ram Pyari, and the two girls forged a bond of great affection from their mutual

predicament. A few days later Ram Pyari was taken away by the kidnappers and Umrao Jan never saw her again. Many years later, Umrao Jan is invited to perform by a *begam* [respectable woman; wife] whom she later recognizes as her former friend Ram Pyari. Ram Pyari is now a respectable woman, married to the very Nawab who was once Umrao Jan's client and lover. On seeing Umrao Jan the Nawab recognizes her but pretends that he does not and Umrao Jan likewise feigns ignorance. This moment of non-recognition establishes the liminality of Umrao Jan's subject position because just as the norms of Umrao Jan's trade require her to feign ignorance to manipulate men, the norms of respectability also require her to feign ignorance to maintain appropriate social decorum.

Therefore, when asked to perform before the Nawab Sahab, Umrao Jan performs a finely crafted *ghazal*. In her study of *ghinnawas*, a Bedouin genre of poetry, Lila Abu-Lughod argues that its formulaic poetic form allowed women "a modest way of communicating immodest sentiments of attachment and an honorable way of communicating the sentiments of dependency" (Abu-Lughod 240). Similarly, the *ghazal*'s reliance on formulaic tropes of love allows Umrao Jan to express her love for the Nawab and still maintain her modesty. In addition, the *ghazal* also lends itself to *kasrat-ul-ma'ani* or a panoply of meanings, and Umrao uses these to explicate her predicament. The multiple meanings are of course intended both for the Nawab and for the reader who, like the Nawab, is intended to read between the lines and grasp the subtext of the verse. On the one hand, the *ghazal* expresses the pain of the lover who has lost her beloved, but on the other hand, it is also a lament for a lost world:

*tum judaai maiN buhut yaad ayey*

*maut tum se bhee sawaa yaad aai* (Ruswa *Umrao Jan Ada* 168)

I thought of you much during our separation

I thought of death a little more

In this verse, Umrao Jan expresses a trope common to the *ghazal* tradition, i.e. separation from the beloved is like death for the lover, for the beloved gives meaning to the lover's life. However, the verse could also be read as a lament for a lost world. In the first line, the speaker uses the pronoun “*tum*” [you], which refers to the lover, but could also refer to her life before the abduction, which is lost to her forever. Knowing she cannot return to the past, she thinks continually of a release from the present in the form of death.

In another verse of the same *ghazal*, the speaker reiterates this desire for death without the beloved by explicitly using the metaphoric vocabulary associated with life and death within the *ghazal* tradition:

*charagar zehr manga de thora*

*ley mujhey apnee dawaa yaad aai* (Ruswa Umrao Jan Ada 168)

O healer, come bring me some poison

You see, I remembered the medicine [for my affliction]

Although I have translated the word “*charagar*” as healer, it literally connotes “solution” [*chara*] “giver” [*gar*]. Death as a release from or a solution to the pain of life is a common trope in the *ghazal* tradition, and in this *shair* the connection is made more explicit, as death is literally the medicine that will cure the speaker from the affliction that is her life. As my explication of the *shair* suggests the *mazmun* of the *shair* is death, and I read this as both a literal death of the lover without the beloved but also as a symbolic death of Umrao Jan's respectability when she became a *tawaif*. The multiple meanings contained within each couplet of this *ghazal* foreground the rendition of the *ghazal* as a performative act. Umrao Jan performs the *ghazal* in her role as a *tawaif*, yet it is intended to be read as a longing to be a *pardah-nasheen* woman. In performing the *ghazal* before Ram Pyari, who represents the unrealized possibilities of Umrao Jan's life and the Nawab her former lover, Umrao Jan reiterates

the liminality of her position.

The final chapter of the novel elucidates the tensions inherent within this occupation of two roles both structurally and conceptually. In the first half of this chapter Umrao Jan discusses the meaning of her life as a *tawaiif*, and also gives us an account of her failures and disappointments, a thread which continues at the end when she gives her sister *tawaiifs* advice on how to live their lives. In the second part of the chapter, she praises her sisters in *pardah* and prays for their well-being, but claims that she can never return to a life in *pardah*. Finally, she concludes by saying that although she regrets her profession she has learnt no other way to earn her livelihood, and thus she has continued to practice her profession. However, having saved a modest amount of money she now plans to devote the rest of her life to reading and prayer, and has thus retired to a modest home. This conclusion suggests that Umrao Jan belongs neither to the world of the *zenana* nor to the world of the brothel because abjected from both, she lives at the margins of both worlds.

Umrao's home in the novel is never specified or described. Rather, it exists as a shadowy space, which is populated by its mistress and her servants, whose existence suggests that she lives a life of relative affluence. However, her home is not located in the *bazaar-e-husn* or courtesans' quarters, but rather is located spatially in the midst of a *sharif* locality, but its mistress never makes her presence known for fear of ostracism. Thus, Umrao Jan is relegated to the margins of both worlds because her desire for "modesty" and the concomitant respectability it bestows can never be fulfilled within the scope of the narrative.

The conclusion of the novel suggests that the modest *tawaiif* cannot be co-opted by either nationalist or imperialist narratives of the nation. Umrao Jan is not the lascivious "nautch girl" of colonial narratives, whose exotic sexuality was

synonymous with the exotic-ness of the Orient.<sup>92</sup> Nor is Umrao Jan the helpless “nautch girl” of other colonial narratives who needs to be saved by the civilized white man, just as the Orient needs to be saved by the civilizing forces of empire. Umrao Jan does not fit into the Deobandi/Aligarh narrative of the nation either because she is not the licentious “awrat,” [woman; a woman’s sexual organs] who threatens to paganize the inner sphere of the *zenana*, that the Aligarh and Deoband reformers used as the “other” to the modest *pardah-nasheen* woman, who represented the pristine inner sphere. Therefore, as a liminal figure, Umrao Jan defies both imperialist and nationalist constructions of the nation.

## II

As a writer deeply engaged with questions of social reform, Premchand had already addressed the question of widow remarriage in his novella *Prema* [Love] which revolved around a young widow’s struggle against the overly strict mores of Hindu caste society. In *Sevasadan*, his next novel, he addresses the question of the Hindu *tawaif*’s place in caste society, a theme he had already dealt with in his short story, *Khoon-i-Huriat*.<sup>93</sup> *Sevasadan* was originally written in Urdu as *Bazaar-e-Husn* [The Marketplace of Beauty], but on finding no publishers for his Urdu novel, Premchand transliterated it into Devnagiri and published it as a Hindi novel. Among Hindi literary circles it achieved instantaneous fame and was subsequently published and re-published, while the Urdu version languished without a publisher until much later.<sup>94</sup> Madan Gopal, Premchand’s biographer, suggests this was because the Hindi

---

<sup>92</sup> For more details on this see Jyostna Singh’s *Colonial Narratives*

<sup>93</sup> “*Khoon-i-Huriat* is the story of a woman who, offended by the husband’s desertion and attachment to another woman, has an argument with him and his haughty callous mistress. Ultimately, she finds her way to the red light street. When the husband sees her there he is disgusted with the whole affair, murders his mistress and commits suicide” (Gopal 134).

<sup>94</sup> For more details on its publication history refer to Madan Gopal’s *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography*

reading public was eager for novels in Hindi, while the Urdu market was flooded with Urdu novels.

The novel begins with Krishnachandra debating the ethics of accepting a bribe to provide a dowry for his daughter Suman's marriage. Krishnachandra's decision to accept a bribe triggers off a series of events which ultimately lead to his and Suman's downfall. Suman is married to an indigent city dweller, Gangadhar, and unable to adjust to the harsh treatment meted out to her by her husband, she becomes a *tawaif* in Dalmandi, the red light district of Kashi, while her repentant husband becomes an ascetic. In a parallel plot strand, Suman's sister Shanta is betrothed to Sadan, a young man who is besotted by Suman's beauty. However, when Sadan's family learns that Shanta is Suman's sister they refuse to marry Sadan to her, and a saddened Shanta seeks refuge in an *ashram* [home] for widows. On the other hand, Sadan's uncle Padamsingh and Vitthaldas urge Suman to forsake her life of sin and start life anew, and after some deliberation Suman agrees to reform herself and leaves Dalmandi. Ironically, Shanta and Suman both find themselves in the same *ashram* [home] for widows. However, the sisters are ejected from the *ashram* when the inmates learn that Suman was a prostitute. Conveniently, just as they are about to embark on their journey away from the *ashram*, they accidentally bump into a remorseful Sadan, who immediately marries Shanta and the three start living together. However, having found happiness with her husband, Shanta taunts and terrorizes Suman, who flees this home in despair and becomes the caretaker of Sevasadan [The house of service], a home for the daughters of *tawaifs*, where she instructs young women in housekeeping and domesticity.

The novel is written within the context of upper-caste, upper-class, Hindu, North Indian society. Like the Bengali intelligentsia, the North Indian Hindu elite also considered women the spiritual repositories of national culture, and deployed the

practice of *purdah* to shield upper-caste Hindu women from the gaze of lower caste, lower class men and from the foreigner, variously defined as the Muslim and British male.<sup>95</sup> As Anne McClintock argues, this perspective rendered women passive, while making men the bearers of a progressive modernity. However, at this historical moment, Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance, which had been very successful in South Africa was being made known in the subcontinent. As Ashis Nandy suggests, Gandhi's notion of *Satyagraha* destabilized the hyper-masculinism of the colonial state, and of the Hindu nationalists, by privileging suffering, which he associated with femininity.<sup>96</sup> This revolutionary move made women the subjects of nationalism rather than the ground through which nationalism was constructed.

As a politically engaged writer, Premchand wrote several essays lauding Gandhi's nationalist movement. In his essay, "Nari jaati ke adhikaar" [The rights of woman-kind] (1931), Premchand writes with approbation of both the movement of *Satyagraha* and of the participation of women in this movement:

*Par is ek varsh ke Satyagraha ne sidh kar diya ki bharat ke deviyaan ab bhi dharm aur kartavya ke vedi par apne ko hom kar sakti hain. Unhein hare k vishay main purushon ke saman adhikar hone chahiye aur iska innray deviyon hee par chod dena chahiye* (Premchand "Nari jaati ke adhikaar" 249-250).

This last year of *Satyagraha* [insistence on the truth] has shown us that the goddesses of India even now sacrifice themselves for their dharma and their

---

<sup>95</sup> See Mahua Sarkar's *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women*.

<sup>96</sup> In his book *The Intimate Enemy: The Psychology of Colonialism* Ashis Nandy argues that Gandhi's *Satyagraha* was an attempt to transcend the discourse of masculine colonialism imposed by the colonizer by privileging differently the hierarchy of colonialism. If the British accorded higher status to cultural hyper-masculinity Gandhi's aim, according to Nandy was to establish a counter discourse privileging *naritva* (the essence of femininity) over *purusatva* (the essence of masculinity), which was in turn privileged over *kapursatva* or cowardice. Nandy gives the equation as follows: *Naritva* > *Purusatva* > *Kapursatva* (Nandy 53)

Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence according to Nandy was created in conjunction with Indian notions of womanhood that privileged women's maternal identity over their conjugal identity.

duty...They should be given rights equal to men in every sphere of life and these decisions should be left to women themselves.

Premchand's approbation of the *bharatiya nari* [Indian woman] is situated in a larger historical context of *sati* [self-immolation] and *jauhar* [collective self-immolation]. By weaving Hindu practices in the same frame as the nationalist practice of *Satyagraha*, Premchand suggests that the two are synonymous, i.e. that both Hinduism and *Satyagraha* require the *bharatiya nari* to sacrifice herself for them.

Saba Mahmood argues that a woman in the mosque movement "is contingently made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions she enacts" (Mahmood 32). In other words, she realizes herself by enacting the "ethical traditions" of Islam, which involve submission to authority and a ritual performance of piety. Similarly, here I argue that the "discursive logic" of a *bharatiya nari* [Indian woman] is part of the "ethical tradition" of *Satyagraha*, which values self-sacrifice and service borne through suffering. Like the Bengali widow who sacrifices herself through a selfless *satita* in the hope of becoming the ideal *kulalakshmi*, the *bharatiya nari* too is motivated by a similar desire to sacrifice herself for her family, and by extension for the nation.<sup>97</sup> Just as the *Satyagrahi* realizes herself by insisting on the truth even though it might cause her pain, the *bharatiya nari* similarly realizes herself only by devoting herself to a cause beyond her home and undergoing suffering in the process. In other words, the *bharatiya nari* needs to frame herself in an ethical context, rather than simply in a societal context.

In the section above I argued that the *tawaif* Umrao Jan Ada realizes herself by creating a metaphoric *purdah* to perform an Islamic notion of respectability prescribed by Aligarh and Deoband reformers, in this section I turn to Premchand's *Sevasadan* to

---

<sup>97</sup> As Anne McClintock argues in "No Longer in a Future Heaven" nationalist discourse subsumed women's agency within the structure of the patriarchal family.

suggest that a similar impetus animates his protagonist Suman. Just as Islamic mores of respectability govern Umrao Jan's performance of *pardah*, I suggest that nationalist ideals of *seva* or service, drawn from a primarily Hindu devotional practice of self-abnegation underlie Suman's performance of respectability. In her embodiment of the role of a *bharatiya nari*, she realizes that her *seva* should not focus on a man, but on an abstract ideal of *dharma* [duty], which extends to the nation. I argue that since suffering is necessary for the *bharatiya nari* to realize herself, Suman's social ostracism and humiliation enable her to realize herself within the context of the nation. From a liberal humanist perspective, Suman's suffering, and the restriction of her freedom cannot be construed as agentive. However, I argue that just as the *bhadralok* widow's infliction of suffering becomes agentive for her when read through the devotional poetics of *bhakti*, a similar desire for subjugation, borne through the ethos of *Satyagraha* and its attendant devotional framework, informs Suman's enactment of suffering.

In what follows, I argue first that Suman shifts from being a Hindu wife to being a *tawaif* because the role of a Hindu wife circumscribes her potential to realize herself. Therefore, when unable to seek herself through this role she takes on the role of the *tawaif*. After this point in the narrative, it seems like everything goes wrong for Suman—she is rejected by Hindu caste society and is forced to move to a home for widows. I argue further that the pain and humiliation Suman suffers as a result of her ejection from *pardah-nasheen* society enable Suman to realize herself as a *bharatiya nari* because they compel her spiritual transformation. From this it is evident that Suman's decline becomes a measure of her success because she finds herself through it.

Moving towards *Seva*: From Hindu wife to *tawaif*

Butler argues that gender is created through “the stylized repetition of acts through time” and hence “the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style (Butler 519). In this section, I extend Butler’s notion of gender and performance to suggest that for Suman, respectability is a performance of discrete acts of femininity, each of which is encoded in a particular set of cultural codes. In other words, Suman’s move from *pardah-nasheen* woman to *tawaif* and then to social outcast is the outcome of her understanding of respectability as the performance of particular codes of femininity.

In an essay on Hindu marriage, Premchand argued that Hindu marriage confined a woman because it compelled her to put up with a man even when he mistreated her:

Even if he [a Hindu man] does not inquire about her [his wife] any more, even if he marries another woman, he still has rights over his wife...However, no matter what faults a man may have, he is the only refuge that a woman has (Premchand “Nari jaati ke adhikaar” 257)

Premchand’s ire against the injustices perpetrated against Hindu women is visible even in his fiction. In *Sevasadan*, Suman is trapped in a similar situation as her husband Gajanand neglects and derides her. At first, Suman perceives respectability as the “stylized repetition” of *pativrata dharma* [literally devotion to the husband]. Hindu society decreed that a wife’s “salvation lay in unqualified devotion to the husband” (Chakravarti 33), and that all Hindu women should therefore strive to embody *pativrata dharma*.<sup>98</sup> In the context of the novel, the norms of *pardah-nasheen* society decree that Gajanand should be Suman’s “refuge,” and that she should find meaning in her life from serving him. However, Suman finds no peace in serving Gajanand and no

---

<sup>98</sup> For more on this see Chakravarti, Uma. “Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi.”

respectability in her role as a Hindu wife. Suman becomes dissatisfied with this performance when she realizes that the relation between her acts and respectability is arbitrary, and hence she adopts another set of norms that accord her respectability.

Significantly, she decides to abandon her role as a Hindu wife when she sees an alternative performance of femininity, which accords its performer respectability. On a visit to Padamsingh's house, Suman encounters a performance by the *tawaif* Bholi bai. Suman realizes that Bholi bai is much coveted by the upper-caste, upper-class elite of Hindu society. Bholi bai's *thumri* [semi-classical romantic song] merely reinforces Suman's decision because its romantic content, which would usually meet with disapproval, is lauded by the respectable elite gathered at Padamsingh's house.<sup>99</sup>

*Aisee holi main aag lage*

*Piya videsh, main dvar taadi, dheeraj kaise rahe?*

*Aise holi main aag lagi* (Premchand *Sevasadan* 40)

Ah the flames of Holi burn inside me,

My love is gone,

I wait at the door,

How can I find the strength to be calm?

The flames of Holi burn inside me (Premchand *Sevasadan* 32).

The genre of *thumri* usually melds the devotional with the romantic, and in this song, Bholi bai sings of the pain that consumes the lover without her beloved, using the imagery associated with the Hindu festival of Holi. Suman reads this song as a metatextual commentary on her own life, in which she is estranged from love. The "flames" of desire that consume the lover waiting for her beloved becomes a metaphor for Suman's sexual desires which consume her because they cannot be fulfilled within

---

<sup>99</sup> For more on the genre of the *thumri* see Vidya Rao's "Thumri as Feminine Voice"

the framework of marriage. Through this *thumri*, Suman realizes that she can only be fulfilled if she transgresses her role as a Hindu wife.

I argue that Suman's decision to abandon her role as a Hindu wife is not framed as a desire to leave Gangadhar or as a desire to fulfill her frustrated sexual desires, but as a rebellion against the norms of *purdah-nasheen* society, which stifle her.

*Woh svaadheen hai, mere pairon main baidiyaan hai. Uski dukaan khuli hai isliye grahakon kee bheed hai, meri dukaan band hai is liye koi khada naheen hota. Who kutte ke bhokne ke parvah naheen karti, main lok-ninda se darti hoon. Who purdah ke bahar hai, main parde ke andar hoon...isi lajja ne, isi uphas ke bhay ne mujhey doosre kee cheri bana rakha hai* (Premchand *Sevasadan* 41).

She [Bholi] is free; there are shackles on my feet....She doesn't care whether or not the dogs bark about her, but I am afraid of what people will say and think. She can go outside of *purdah*, while I am cloistered in it...This shame and this fear of derision have made me the servant of others (Premchand *Sevasadan* 33).

In her articulation of her frustrated desires, Suman blames the confining norms of upper-caste Hindu society for her predicament. They are characterized as a form of imprisonment (the “shackles” on her feet) and surveillance (the “dogs” that bark at her), which bind her to her role as a Hindu wife. The “shame” and “derision” she fears are born from her perception that her desires are unacceptable within the framework of *purdah-nasheen* society.

I argue further that when Suman decides to abandon the profession of a courtesan it is motivated by a desire to embody the very norms of *purdah-nasheen*

society that acted as “shackles” on her feet. Just as her turn to prostitution is catalyzed by her encounter with Bholi bai, her abandonment of this role is catalyzed by her encounter with Vitthaldas, a social reformer who acts as a mouthpiece for a Gandhian ethos of living, and represents everything that Bholi Bai is not. Therefore, Vitthaldas’s speech, which ultimately persuades Suman to abandon her life as a *tawaif* is the converse of Bholi Bai’s song of love and longing:

*Tum yahaan chahe aur kisi ki gulaam na ho, par apni indriyon ki gulaam tou ho? Indriyon kee gulaami us paradheenta se kaheen dukhdaayini hoti hai. Yahaan tumhein na such milega, na adar* (Premchand *Sevasadan* 87).

Even if you are not anyone’s slave, can you deny that you are a slave to your senses? Being a slave to one’s senses is much worse than any other slavery.

You will find neither respect nor happiness here (Premchand *Sevasadan* 72).

In contrast to Bholi Bai’s *thumri* in which an implicitly sexual union with the beloved is the ultimate goal of the lover, Vitthaldas refers to Suman’s attachment to sensory pleasures and by extension, sexual pleasure as “slavery.” Vitthaldas’s pronouncement exceeds the sexual mores of *pardah-nasheen* society, which legitimizes a woman’s sexual pleasure within the confines of conjugality. Vitthaldas’s exegesis on the sins of pleasure echoes a Gandhian philosophy of abjuration. Within the Gandhian discourse of self-realization, attachment to material objects and to sensory pleasure was denounced because it prevented the Gandhian subject from realizing herself. In addition, implicit in the philosophy of *Satyagraha* is the notion of self-control, the converse of Bholi Bai’s unabashed pursuit of desire. Thus, the unfulfilled sexual desires that compelled her to become a prostitute now become the epitome of her enslavement.

By concurring with Vitthaldas’s assessment Suman adopts the Gandhian

framework to enact her self-realization. She concludes that “happiness was born out of contentment, and respect out of service” (Premchand *Sevasadan* 72) [“*use aaj maloom hua ke such santosh se praapt hota hai aur adar seva se*” (Premchand *Sevasadan* 87-88)]. In contrast to her previous devotion to fulfilling only the pleasures of her senses Suman’s new perspective foregrounds a Gandhian notion of *seva* [service] that exceeds the notion of *seva* upheld by *pardah-nasheen* society. While the *pardah-nasheen* notion of *seva* for Hindu women was encompassed in the notion of *pativrata dharma*, the Gandhian notion of *seva* requires an abnegation of the self for the nation. In adopting this Gandhian ethos of *seva*, Suman replaces one socially sanctioned performance of femininity for another. Hence, she willingly abandons the life of the prostitute and moves to an *ashram* [home] for widows, and thereby self-consciously remakes herself in a mode of femininity that renders her a social outcast, a move that is necessary to make her a Gandhian subject. This move therefore also signals the onset of her spiritual journey because from now on she seeks approbation from within rather than without, through the Gandhian notion of *seva* as self-abnegation rather than through pleasure.

#### Becoming a *Bharatiya nari*: Suman’s Journey from *Ashram* to *Sevasadan*

In her essay “Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?” Uma Chakravarti argues that in the mid-late-nineteenth century both Orientalists and the indigenous elite were avidly interested in ancient Hindu scriptures. Scholars such as John Stuart Mill suggested that the depraved conditions of Hindu women could be traced to the ancient scriptures, which decreed that a Hindu woman’s ultimate duty is to serve her husband through *pativrata* [a combination of two words, *pati* [husband] and *vrata* [lit. vow], which together connote devotion to a husband] *dharma*. This became a topic of heated debate when the “women’s question” came to the forefront, and reformers such as

“Mrityunjay, and then Rammohun, argued that the ultimate goal of all Hindus was selfless absorption in a divine essence, a union which could not flow from an action like *sati*” (Chakravarti 33). As an ardent advocate for the abolition of *sati*, Rammohun Roy’s argument succeeded in bringing about legal reform (*sati* was banned in 1829), but did not change the social performances of femininity expected from women, which maintained that the woman’s ultimate *dharma* lay in serving her husband.

Fifty years later, Gandhi revived this notion of spirituality as union with the divine through subjugation in his notion of *Satyagraha*. The program of *Satyagraha* involved an abandonment of the self through distinctively Hindu practices of asceticism, which involved suffering and pain. In its social dimension, *Satyagraha* also required regeneration of the national body through acts of selfless *seva*,<sup>100</sup> for these acts led the devotee closer to god. In the novel, Premchand privileges this notion of spirituality as union with god through *seva* over the *pativrata dharma* of the conservative Hindu nationalists by juxtaposing Shanta’s *purdah-nasheen* ideal of *seva* as *pativrata dharma* with Suman’s nationalist ideal of *seva*. In the course of the narrative, Suman and not Shanta is upheld as the ideal *bharatiya nari* because Suman alone transcends the norms of *purdah-nasheen* society and realizes herself within a larger national context.

When Shanta’s marriage is abruptly terminated she is cast into a liminal role by *purdah-nasheen* society. She is neither a married woman, nor a single woman and she is therefore removed to the peripheries of her society. She is thus subject to the taunts of her aunt and the indifference of her uncle, both of which she bears with fortitude. The third person omniscient narrator suggests that her fortitude arises from the strength of her love as a married woman:

---

<sup>100</sup> Gandhi melds the devotee’s love for the divine with the nationalists love for his nation in his exposition on the nature of *seva*, which stems from an act of love: “Love becomes a sordid bargain when it asks for return or compensation; it degrades. Spontaneous service of love purifies and elevates” (Gandhi *An Autobiography* 33).

*Uske man ne kaha, jise pativratt jaisa sadhan mil gaya hai use aur kisi sadhan ki kya avashyakta? Is main sukh, santosh aur shanty sab kuch hai* (Premchand *Sevasadan* 212)

She [Shanta] thought to herself—a woman who has found means in faithful service of her husband needs nothing else to help her. In it, she finds happiness, contentment and peace” (Premchand *Sevasadan* 176-177).

As this suggests, Shanta derives strength from “faithful service” to her absent husband because he becomes her protector through this act of service. The word Shanta uses to connote service is “*pativratt*” which connotes devotion to a husband. I argue that the use of this word instead of the word *seva* suggests that Shanta’s ethos of service circumscribes itself to her husband alone. Service for Shanta, then, is merely a means by which she fully secures her relationship with her protector, and Shanta therefore fails to become a *bharatiya nari* because her ideals of service and forbearance do not extend beyond her husband.

I argue that in contrast Suman’s notion of service is more in keeping with the nationalist ideal of service as *seva* because it arises from self-abnegation.<sup>101</sup> The process of Suman’s self-abnegation begins when she selflessly serves the inmates of the *ashram* for widows. However, I argue that Suman’s encounter with Shanta, the one who epitomizes the values of *pardah-nasheen* society, brings to the fore her self-hatred and therefore catalyzes her process of self-abnegation, which ultimately enables her to become a *bharatiya nari*. On Shanta’s arrival at the *ashram*, Suman is overcome with shame and disgust at herself:

---

<sup>101</sup> Commenting on the brave action of Mohanlal Pandya [a *satyagrahi*] who stole onions from a field to get himself into prison Gandhi writes: “He [Mohanlal Pandya] did not like the campaign to end without someone undergoing suffering in the shape of imprisonment for something done consistently with the principles of *Satyagraha*” (Gandhi *An Autobiography* 536). Implicit in this comment is the assumption that the correct enactment of *Satyagraha* necessitates suffering.

*Main paapin hoon, main abhagin hoon, main bhrashta hoon, too devi hai too sadhavi hai, mujhse apne ko sparsh na hone de. Is hriday ko vasaanaon ne, laalsaaon ne dushkamnaaon ne malin kar diya hai, too apne ujval, svach hriday ko iske paas mat la, yahaan se bhaag ja* (Premchand *Sevasadan* 248).

I am a sinner, cursed, a whore. You are a goddess, a saint. Don't let yourself be polluted by me. Lust, desire and sin have sullied this heart. Don't bring your bright and true spirit near me. Run away from here. The fires into the gates of hell are burning before me, and the messenger of death is dragging me into that fire. (Premchand *Sevasadan* 205).

Suman compares herself to Shanta in terms of the social roles that the two women occupy. Thus, while she herself is a “whore” Shanta is a “saint,” whose purity would be sullied by contact with Suman. Suman's framing of herself as a “sinner” reflects her internalization of the Gandhian ideal of the *bharatiya nari*, who is untainted by “lust” and “sin.” This framing thus propels Suman to cleanse herself by purging her “desires” through selfless service. While Bholi Bai's “fire” ignited Suman's unfulfilled sexual desires, the “fire” of *seva* purges her of these very desires. In addition, at this point in the narrative Suman faints--an act which suggests the symbolic death of her “cursed” self. When she comes to consciousness she awakens a new woman who dedicates herself to a life of *seva* to the widows in the *ashram* thus commencing the process of her self-abnegation.

However, the process of self-abnegation requires that Suman not only purge herself from desire but also endure suffering. The process of suffering begins soon after Suman's revelation when the inmates of the *ashram* learn that Suman was formerly a *tawaiif*, they begin shunning her and she must suffer once again for her life of “sin” at Dalmandi. Although Suman leaves the *ashram* with Shanta the stigma

attached to her profession continues to haunt her as even her sister Shanta expels her from her home when she suspects that Sadan may still harbour feelings of tenderness towards Suman from his former association with her as a *tawaif*. Ejected from *ashram* and then from her sister's home, Suman is progressively displaced from even the margins of Hindu society.

These events in the narrative gradually purge Suman of all her desires and thereby prepare her for the ultimate act of service. In keeping with the Gandhian frame of *seva* as part of the *satyagrahi*'s spiritual quest, Suman's initiation into her *seva* is cast as part of her spiritual evolution. When ejected from Shanta's home, Suman hears a holy man beckoning her, but when she follows him he moves further away, until at last they reach a hut where Suman proceeds to faint once again. When she awakens she finds herself in the presence of Gajanand, her former husband turned ascetic who has no recollection of leading Suman to his hut. When she awakens from her fainting spell, Gajanand asks Suman to head a school for the daughters of *tawaifs*, who are the hapless victims of social ostracism, and Suman willingly agrees. The quasi-mystical elements of this narrative literalize Suman's spiritual awakening, while the meeting with her former husband brings the events of the narrative to a full circle because this moment in the narrative offers the possibility of conjugality.

Suman's abjuration of sexual desire in the process of self-abnegation means that she can no longer return to her former role as a Hindu wife because it contains the possibility of fulfilling sexual desire through conjugality. Therefore, rather than re-joining Gajadhar in domesticity and re-assuming the role of Hindu wife, she takes on the task of educating the daughters of *tawaifs*, those whose conditions of life most resemble her own. In doing so she finally assumes the role of *bharatiya nari* because she dedicates her life to selfless devotion. She heads an institution, which is appropriately named Sevasadan or the abode [*sadan*] of service [*seva*].

Sevasadan lies at the outskirts of Hindu society, both literally and figuratively and therefore comes to signify Suman's own marginalization. Like Umrao Jan, Suman's new abode is respectable and decent, but despite its modest trappings, it is never really absorbed within Hindu society because its inhabitants are the illegitimate progeny of "respectable" society. Therefore, the home remains marginal to Hindu society because it houses those who have been abjected by it. However, as argued above, Suman's marginalization enables her spiritual evolution, and the *ashram* represents the pinnacle of her spiritual journey. Suman's spiritual evolution means that she is finally able to look beyond the circumstances of her own life to reach out to other unfortunate young women. Her spiritual evolution then leads her to educate the young women under her care in cooking, sewing and housekeeping in the hope that they will someday embody the ideal of the Hindu wife that she never could embody herself.

In addition to living a life of *seva*, she also teaches the young women under her care about the virtues of a life dedicated to *seva*. This is made explicit when the young women sing a *bhajan* [devotional song] about their desire to embody *seva*:

*He jagat pita, jagat prabhu*

*Mujhey apna prem aur pyar de*

*Teri bhakti main lage man mera*

*Vishay kaamna ko bisaar de (Premchand Sevasadan 329)*

O father of the universe, O lord of the universe

Give me your love and affection

Let my mind be focused on your devotion

Help me forget my attachment to sensual enjoyment

In this song, the frame of devotion moves away from man towards god. Thus, unlike

other young Hindu women who are taught to devote themselves to their god-like husbands, the devotion of these young women is unambiguously coded as devotion to god, for god alone is “father” and “lord” of the universe. To fully realize themselves in the act of devotion, however, they must rid themselves of “*vishay*” or attachment to objects of the senses, i.e. sensual enjoyment. In this, their devotional practice is also in keeping with the performance of *bhakti* as prescribed by the *Vaishanava* tradition.

In his essay on the *bhakti* tradition, Hopkins suggests that “the purpose of *bhakti* is to destroy men’s attachment to the world by shifting their affection and desire from the world to the Lord. As attachment and devotion to Bhagavan [God] increase, attachment to the world decreases, and release from *samsara* [the world] is possible” (Hopkins 8). Similarly, Suman’s dedication to god has enabled her to rid herself of her former attachment to sensual pleasure. This performance of *bhakti* gestures to the other song of devotion sung in the novel, which catalyzed Suman’s downfall. While Bholi Bai’s *thumri* coded desire through devotion and hence legitimized it, this song creates a dichotomy between devotion and desire, in which devotion rather than desire triumphs, for the lord of the universe is called upon to help his devotees “forget” attachment and “focus” on devotion.

It is evident then, that at the end of the novel Suman has exceeded the norms of *pardah-nasheen* society in her quest to embody the nationalist ideals of the nation. However, her embodiment of these norms does not re-integrate her into Hindu society because she has exceeded the roles available to her. Similarly, despite Premchand’s nationalist fantasy of the *bharatiya nari* whose dharma is dedication to the nation, the nationalist movement remains conspicuously absent from the novel. This curious absence suggests that although Suman has fully absorbed the ethos of *seva* the nationalist narrative of the nation cannot accommodate within its scope the *seva* of a woman who has been abjected from her society.

### III

#### Re-inscribing *Purdah*: *Purdah-nasheen* society and the *tawaif*

In her analysis of veiling as a social practice, Homa Hoodfar argues that although seemingly static from an outsider's perspective, the significations of the veil have been continually evolving in societies where veiling is practiced.<sup>102</sup> She analyzes the many connotations of veiling and suggests that women have re-signified the veil to enact their agency. In the context of this paper, to consider the *tawaif* as re-signifying hegemonic discourse and thereby destabilizing it would be to make her the subject of a liberal humanist project. Rather, as I have argued so far, the *tawaifs* of these novels struggle to reinsert themselves into their respective societies by performing socially sanctioned forms of respectability. In keeping with Saba Mahmood's emphasis that individuals are contingently produced by the authoritative discourses of their society and that they "recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these traditions," (Mahmood 32), I suggest that in emphasizing the embodiment of *purdah*, the *tawaifs* re-instate the "virtues and codes" of their traditions, which are modesty, service, and devotion. In doing so, they ironically become the repositories of the social norms valued by their society.

As discussed above, in both novels, the *purdah* becomes instrumental for the *tawaifs* to complicate their subject position in their society. In *Umrao Jan Ada*, Umrao Jan is a *tawaif* but also a respectable woman because she uses a *purdah* of words to shield herself from the hazards of her profession. On the other hand, in *Sevasadan*, Suman is a fallen woman but also a reformer because she educates the young women in her care in embodying not only the norms *purdah-nasheen* society but also the

---

<sup>102</sup> For more details on this see Homa Hoodfar's "The Veil in their minds and on our heads: The persistence of colonial images of Muslim women."

grandeur ideals of the nation. Their inhabitation of *purdah*, then, enables them to simultaneously occupy multiple subject positions. In inhabiting multiple subject positions, they use the norms of *purdah* but change them in the context of the particular circumstances of their life.

In *Umrao Jan Ada*, Umrao Jan turns the *purdah*, a physical symbol of modesty, into a symbolic shield that protects her from the norms of the *kotha* even as she participates in them. In doing so, she reinforces the Aligarh and Deoband notion of the *purdah-nasheen* woman as one who does not simply veil herself, but who embodies Islamic codes of modesty and propriety. Similarly, at the beginning of *Sevasadan*, the *purdah* is a symbol of Suman's oppression, but by the end of the novel, Suman embraces and transcends the norms associated with *purdah*. Since the mores of *purdah-nasheen* society dictate that a woman finds respectability by observing the stringent norms of *purdah*, therefore Suman insists on modesty and respectability in her *ashram*. The norms of *purdah* were meant to preserve women as repositories of spirituality; in her ashram, Suman reinforces this notion by insisting on selfless service to god.

In both accounts, the *tawaiifs* emphasize the enactment of *purdah* through an internalization of its norms, rather than simply through a physical act of clothing, and in this they become the ideal, normative subjects of Deoband/Aligarh and nationalist discourse respectively. However, the narrative does not allow them into the national context because the nation cannot account for the *tawaiif's* performance of respectability within its framework. Nationalist discourse cannot usurp this *tawaiif* as a figure of "otherness" on which they can construct the nation all that the nation is not because she performs respectability. Similarly, imperialist dichotomies of the "chaste" *zenana* woman and the "lascivious" "nautch-girl," both of which were integral to the

civilizing mission of colonialism, are disrupted by the figure of the modest *tawaif*.<sup>103</sup> The presence of the *tawaif*, then disrupts both imperialist and nationalist formations of the nation because she suggests a third mode of being, which could not be accounted for in the discourse of nationalism or imperialism.

---

<sup>103</sup> Two opposing impulses guided the colonial mission. With reference to the respectable woman who lived in the *zenana*, the colonial desire to civilize them was to “make them less opaque, to strip them of their veils, and to remove them from harems where they lived lives hidden from the European male” (Grewal 49). Conversely, the “nautch-girl” represented the dark, illicit mysteries of the East and hence the civilizing mission in this context, involved disciplining their sexuality: “The lack of middle-class bourgeois “respectability” of women artistes, courtesans, poor women, and women from lower castes came to be seen as a threat by the middle of the nineteenth century such that forms of sexuality were disciplined in new ways” (Grewal 55).

The Sacred and the Secular:  
Spirituality, Aesthetics and Politics in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and Vikram  
Chandra's *Sacred Games*

Historically speaking, the divide between the sacred and the secular in South Asian has been the subject of much political debate. Rabindranath Tagore challenged Gandhi's interpretation of the Bihar earthquake as the necessary punishment for the caste injustice prevalent in Bihar, by arguing that the divine could not be responsible for radical evil. Citing this instance in *Guru English*, Srinivas Aravamudan asks: "Ultimately, the question is whether the juxtaposed integration of the sacred and the secular is fundamentally suspect in ways that cannot be rationalized through attempts to sanitize those juxtapositions according to a 'correct' philosophical attitude" (Aravamudan 166). The "sacred," suggested by Aravamudan's account, is an episteme that exists outside of the colonial encounter (anterior to it) and outside of politics because its juxtaposition with the secular calls for serious ethical questioning. According to Aravamudan, the intermingling of the sacred with the secular, is "fundamentally suspect," and cannot be justified by a "correct" philosophical attitude.

Aravamudan's suspicion of the sacred arises from the liberal, humanist notion that the sacred is inherently antithetical to the secular project of the contemporary nation-state. In the context of South Asian politics of the past two decades or so, this anxiety might seem justified as both India and Pakistan have accelerated the nuclear arms race in a masculine charade of political one-upmanship. As Aravamudan notes, this phenomenon has taken on overtly religious connotations as both countries have assigned religious names to their weapons of mass destruction, a phenomenon which Aravamudan argues reinforces the religious rationale that underlies the Partition of

India.<sup>104</sup> However, while the implications of the conjoining of the sacred and secular are indeed worrisome, as in the context of nuclear proliferation, no amount of wishful thinking will spirit the sacred away from the avowedly secular national body.

While my chapters on Bengali and Urdu fiction have largely been preoccupied with the way in which marginalized female subjects disrupt narratives of the nation through articulations of agency that are embedded in sacred epistemologies, in this chapter, I move my analysis a step further to consider the way in which sacred epistemologies deconstruct colonial and postcolonial notions of the South Asian nation as a feminized space that needs rationality/secularism to bring it into modernity. More specifically, I argue that in *Sacred Games* (2007), Vikram Chandra creatively rewrites the colonial ideology of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, (1901) in the context of the contemporary postcolonial nation-state, and in doing so he deconstructs the colonial binaries that structure the narrative of empire in *Kim*. In other words, while Kipling's narrative suggests that the nation is a sacred and therefore passive, feminine space which needs the secular, rationality of empire to bring it into modernity, Chandra's narrative purposefully confuses these binaries to suggest that there exists no sacred outside the machinations of the nation-state. Through my analysis, I bring the concerns of this dissertation to the present moment, to consider the ways in which the postcolonial nation continues to be feminized in nationalist discourse and argue that Chandra's novel suggests an alternative construction of the nation, which enables us to understand the complex articulations of the limitations of secularism in the production of national entities.

Written at a period of British high imperialism, *Kim*'s narrative establishes the supremacy of British military rule through the trope of the "Great Game." The Great

---

<sup>104</sup> For more details on this see Aravamudan's *Guru English*, especially Chapter 4: The Hindu Sublime, or Nuclearism rendered Cultural

Game is an elaborate network of international espionage in which British men protect Indian men from the dangers of French and Russian invaders by thwarting their attempts to infiltrate the Indian subcontinent. The titular hero of Kipling's *Kim* is a young Anglo-Irish boy who grows up on the streets of India and becomes the disciple of an itinerant Lama searching for the holy river of the Buddhists, the River of the Arrow. However, when *Kim* is recognized by the English as a white boy, he is forced to give up his wandering "native" lifestyle and go to school where he learns the business of empire, eventually becoming a spy in the service of the "Great Game" of international espionage.

As the title suggests, *Sacred Games* is the story of a "game" which unfolds in the contemporary postcolonial nation-state. The narrative consists of four interweaving plot strands that come together in a climactic finale at the end of the novel when the "sacred game" is finally revealed. Our first introduction is to Sartaj Singh, a police inspector who is deputed to bring criminal Ganesh Gaitonde out of hiding. However, Gaitonde commits suicide at the very beginning of the novel, leaving Sartaj to solve the mystery of his unexpected appearance in Mumbai and his equally sudden suicide. Thus like *Kim*, the narrative involves a male protagonist in pursuit of criminals who threaten the sovereignty of the nation-state. In a parallel narrative strand, Gaitonde narrates the story of his life from beyond the grave to help Sartaj (and the reader) solve the mystery of his suicide. Gaitonde's death also preoccupies Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) officer Anjali Mathur and her mentor K.D. Yadav, and a third narrative strand delves into their investigation. Each of these plot strands is indirectly interwoven into Swami Shukla's "sacred game," which involves *pralay* [apocalypse] or a nuclear annihilation of the world to build a "pure" Hindu nation in its place. Swami Shukla uses his status as a godman to move men and weapons across countries and ruthlessly manipulates his disciples, of which

Gaitonde is the foremost, to realize his “sacred game.”

While *Kim* and *Sacred Games* are both narratives that describe international espionage through the trope of the “game,” they radically differ in their depiction of it. In Kipling’s vision, the Great Game is located in the “material” sphere of politics and intrigue, while the subcontinent itself is located in a “spiritual” sphere of mystics and arcane rituals. The subcontinent’s “spirituality” must remain sacrosanct and removed from the Great Game, so that it can provide necessary succor to the white players of the Great Game, especially Kim. As Edward Said observes in his introduction to *Kim* “it was Indian culture and religion that could defeat the materialism and mechanism (and republicanism) of Occidental culture” (Said 115), a discourse which marked the “culture and religion” of the subcontinent as an alterity removed from the business of empire. However, colonial discourse assumed that the Orient’s “spirituality” has made it weak-passive-feminine, and thus the Orient (and in the context of *Kim*, the subcontinent) needs Empire with its ideology of rationality and science (of which the Great Game is a manifestation) to bring it into an active, masculine modernity.

I argue that in *Sacred Games*, Chandra complicates Kipling’s binary between the “spiritual” East and the “material” West by using *Kim*’s narrative as both a framework for and a counterpoint to his own narrative. I argue that Chandra’s “sacred game” radically undermines the epistemic, political and ethical underpinnings of the “Great Game” because the novel is structured both aesthetically and politically by the Hindu notion of *leela* or divine play. Hindus across different philosophical schools think of *leela* as God’s “free and joyous creativity” (Hein 13) which results in all creation. However, the *Advaitins* or Monists additionally believe that because the universe is the outcome of *Brahman*’s [the divine Absolute’s] creative play, it is characterized by instability and randomness. On the other hand, the *Dvaitins* or Dualists believe that the universe is ordered by God’s play with his consorts which the

devotee replicates in his devotion, and thus earthly devotion acts as a double to God's *leela*.<sup>105</sup>

One might be tempted to conclude that since the aesthetics and politics of *Sacred Games* are structured by the notion of play, the novel falls within the genre of “postmodern” fiction, which is characterized by the notion of play. However, one must caution against such a reading because as a postcolonial text, the novel grapples not only with the literary culture of modernism but also with the modernity of the postcolonial nation-state, which necessarily inflects its postmodern aesthetic. Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that the “Third World” novel, written in the aftermath of colonialism is compelled to grapple with the modernization of the postcolonial nation-state, hence it embodies “not postmodernism but postmodernisation; not an aesthetics but a politics, in the most literal sense of the term” (Appiah 439). I argue however, that *Sacred Games* is a text of both postmodernism and postmodernisation because it engages with literary modernism and political modernity.

As a postmodernist novel it grapples with a major “modern” canonical text and with the high culture of literary modernism through the notion of play. Aesthetically, the novel is characterized by the *Advaitin* notion of *leela* as instability, lawlessness and play and by the *Dvaitin* notion of *leela* as doubling, which is both internal to the narrative (the doubling of narrative elements within the novel) as well as external to it (the novel as a textual doubling of *Kim*); thus characters in *Sacred Games* act as narrative doubles to those in *Kim* and plot elements from *Kim* are repeated in the narrative of *Sacred Games*. However, because the aesthetics of the novel are at once part of a longer Hindu textual and cultural tradition and of English literary modernism, the novel can neither be unambiguously categorized as postmodern, nor can we impose on it an atavistic reading of a “pure” Hindu aesthetics. Rather, I urge us to read

---

<sup>105</sup> For more details on this see *The Gods at Play: Lila in South Asia* by William S. Sax

the novel's simultaneous use of postmodernist and Hindu aesthetics as part of its imbrication in the politics of the postcolonial state.

As a novel of *postmodernisation*, it interrogates the colonial legacy of a militant Hinduism which has been transformed into the Hindu right-wing politics of the postcolonial Indian nation. On the eve of its independence from British rule, the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into Hindu and Muslim nations and these “religious denominations...provided a fresh basis on which to settle claims of territorial sovereignty” (Jalal 560). The subsequent politics of both India and Pakistan have been grounded in a discourse of religious difference, which escalates to masculine militarism when the territorial sovereignty of either nation is threatened. The Hindu right-wing in India has mobilized this discourse of religious difference to claim that India is a “Hindu nation,” which must be cleansed of its impure elements. I argue that in *Sacred Games*, Chandra mobilizes the *Advaitin* notion of *leela* as lawlessness to destabilize the paradigm of patriarchal control upon which the Hindu right bases its narrative of the nation. Similarly, the *Dvaitin* notion of doubling destabilizes the binary between good and evil, right and wrong, that structures both the narrative of empire and the narrative of the Hindu right, as characters on opposing sides of the battlefield echo each other's philosophies.

The aesthetics and politics of *leela* work in tandem to deconstruct the epistemic, political and ethical contours of the Great Game. In what follows, I argue that Chandra plays with the narrative conventions of Kipling's novel to undermine the ideological premises of the Great Game by creating a “sacred game” that revels in lawlessness and play both formally and ideologically. Following from this, I argue that Kipling's narrative makes use of ethnographical, geographical and spiritual maps to perpetuate the Great Game, while Chandra's narrative creates the map as an opaque object that resists the nation-state's attempt to manipulate it for political ends. Finally,

I argue that Chandra destabilizes Kipling's construction of the sacred as a harmless alterity that exists outside of the Great Game by creating an ungodly godman, who is deeply implicated in the politics of the postcolonial nation-state.

### The Thriller and the Anti-Thriller

In this section, I argue that the ideological underpinnings of Kipling's *Kim* are deeply tied into its formal structure. The Great Game is premised on a myth of racial superiority and is played according to the rules and proper codes of conduct that underlie the British public school ethos of sportsmanship. The narrative structure of *Kim* is closely tied in with this ideology of conquest. Thus, events follow a logical sequence and culminate in the defeat of those who threaten the sovereignty of empire and the victory of the white men who rule it. Therefore, I argue that Chandra's novel plays with form to confound the ideological certainties of Kipling's narrative. More specifically, I argue that the *Advaitin* aesthetic of *leela* as randomness and chance and the *Dvaitin* aesthetic of *leela* as doubling undermine the colonial binary between good and evil, white and brown, that underlies the narrative of the Great Game.

In *Cover Stories*, Michael Denning argues that early twentieth-century British imperial-adventure novels like *Kim* were attempts to shore up an imperial identity in the face of territorial encroachments that threatened the sovereignty of empire. In other words, the linear narrative structure of *Kim*, which leads to a climatic dénouement where good wins over evil, enables the hegemonic narrative of empire. Denning suggests that this narrative structure is possible only because the novel contains no ideological ambiguities, i.e. since the white characters of Kipling's *Kim* are presumably "naturally" superior to the brown characters, they must win the Great

Game of international espionage.<sup>106</sup>

In *Kim*, this racial coding is slightly nuanced because Kim occupies both a “native” and a “white” identity. However, this ambiguity is rapidly resolved in the novel, as Kim uses his dual identities to play the Great Game with greater adeptness. In other words, Kim is “naturally” adept at playing the Great Game because he is at once the wily “oriental” capable of masterful intrigue, as well as the pragmatic, hardy, courageous Anglo-Irish boy, best suited to play the Great Game.<sup>107</sup> As Suvir Kaul argues, “The ideological fantasy at the heart of *Kim* (Kim as white Sahib who is at once brown native) can be preserved only if Kim is...white and British in his affiliations but not quite white and certainly not British in his everyday ways” (Kaul 427), and it is this fantasy that Kipling perpetuates through *Kim*’s character. However, Kim is able to inhabit both identities because he is “white,” i.e. his British identity “naturally” enables him to master and manipulate multiple personas for the perpetuation of the Great Game. Conversely, *Kim*’s investment in learning the game is in turn an assertion of his “whiteness,” which as Parama Roy argues is “never something that can be taken as given; it must also be learned, demonstrated, and defended” (Roy 401) because Kim suffers from anxiety about his Irish heritage.<sup>108</sup>

Kim’s defense of his “whiteness” is demonstrated through his internalization of the unspoken rules of Empire, derived from the British public school ethos of sportsmanship, which uphold male camaraderie and honor as the true marks of an

---

<sup>106</sup> “The novel of espionage is the tale of the boundary between nations and cultures, and the spy acts as a defender or subverter of the nation in the face of the other, the alien. The spy story appears in Britain in the wake of the heroic novels of imperial adventure and narrates the threat to the Empire. The spy became the figure for the fortunes of Empire in Britain, providing explanations for its decline and its betrayal” (Denning 13-14).

<sup>107</sup> As the novel progresses, and as *Kim* becomes a more successful player of the Great Game, *Kim*’s Irish identity recedes and is supplanted by his identity as an English man.

<sup>108</sup> Several critics, in addition to the ones mentioned above, have engaged with the colonial framework of *Kim*: Sara Suleri’s *The Rhetoric of English India*; Suvir Kaul’s “*Kim*, or How to be Young, Male, and British in Kipling’s India”; Abdul R JanMohamed’s “The economy of Manichean allegory: The function of racial difference in colonialist literature”; Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “The Burden of English” among others.

Englishman. As scholars have shown, Victorian youth fiction naturalized empire through the discourse of imperial masculinity which required young English men to assert their “natural” authority over unknown lands and peoples by embodying manliness and practicing strong Christian morals.<sup>109</sup> Accordingly, Robert Baden-Powell’s *Scouting for Boys: A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship*, published in 1907, a few years after *Kim*, upholds Kim as the exemplary boy scout, who at a young age is in training to become an imperial master.<sup>110</sup> *Kim* became the textbook for generations of British boy-scouts who were taught virtues of courage and sportsmanship through this narrative of imperial dominance.<sup>111</sup>

Baden Powell use of Kim’s character as an exemplary boy-scout is possible only because through the novel, *Kim* treats the Great Game as a “game” that he plays successfully, much like the boy-scout plays at the game of empire. Kipling describes Kim’s understanding of the game as “intrigue,” “It was intrigue, of course---he knew that much, as he had known all evil since he could speak, --but what he loved was the game for its own sake—the stealthy prowl through dark gullies and lanes” (Kipling 51). Kim’s acquaintance with the rules of “intrigue” even before his initiation in the Great Game reinforces the imperial assumption that the exercise of power is “natural” to the English as a race, and that all young boys who want to serve England should become well-acquainted with the rules of intrigue. The narrator’s description of intrigue as a “stealthy prowl” through dimly lit lanes suggests that intrigue is merely an extended version of the game of Hide and Seek, in which the spy who hides himself

---

<sup>109</sup> In *Imperial Encounters*, Peter van der Veer argues that an imperial masculinity based on Christian morals is essential for *Kim*’s success in the Great Game.

<sup>110</sup> Baden-Powell narrates the story of Kipling’s novel in great detail and draws the young boy-scout’s attention to particular instances in which Kim effectively demonstrates the skills necessary for a boy scout. He concludes with the following remark: “These and other adventures of Kim are well worth reading, because they show what valuable work a boy-scout could do for his country if he were sufficiently trained and sufficiently intelligent” (Baden-Powell 18).

<sup>111</sup> In his introduction to the Penguin edition of *Kim*, Edward Said notes that the novel was instrumental in inculcating the moral values needed for the perpetuation of Empire.

best is most likely to succeed, and the subsequent events of the narrative reinforce the notion that “intrigue” is a game, rather than a profession. Thus, the real world of spying never disrupts the narrative conventions of the imperial-adventure novel

When Kim learns the art of disguise from Lurgan Sahib, it is as another form of “play” by which the errant school boy can escape the notice of his guardians. This becomes evident when *Kim* playfully disguises E23, a fellow spy, as a holy man to help him escape his predators. The rationale that propels this disguise is flimsy at best, for drawing on his acquaintance with the guileless Lama, Kim presumes that holy men are outside the purview of suspicion. In keeping with the logic of the imperial adventure novel, the spy escapes the recognition of the “Orientals” in search of him, but is not able to deceive an English inspector. It is evident then, that his disguise is part of a game, a play on appearances that deceives unknowing Orientals but is not good enough to deceive a true Englishman, who recognizes the disguise for what it is-- a form of play that is necessary for the Great Game. This instance of “play” is paradigmatic of the ideology that underlies the functioning of the Great Game. When *Kim* disguises E23 as a holy man, he asserts his role as the secular, masculine agent of the British empire. In addition, the disguise is premised on the notion of the Oriental sacred as a passive, harmless alterity, which can be manipulated by the agent of Empire for the perpetuation of the Great Game, and the disguise succeeds precisely because it is in keeping with the rules that structure the colonial binary of “sacred-passive-effeminate” and “secular-active-masculine.”

Therefore the Game is at once a form of racial hegemony and an extended version of the public school performance of sportsmanship, and the two work in conjunction to reinforce the moral certainties that underlie imperial power. As seen above, the narrative structure of *Kim* reinforces the ideological underpinnings of the Great Game, and the rules of Great Game extend to the narrative conventions of the

novel, as well, for in keeping with the genre of the “romantic” spy thriller, at the end of the novel, good triumphs over evil when the English contain the French and Russian forces that threaten their sovereignty. The novel concludes with a satisfying climactic moment in which the mysterious inner workings of the Great Game are explained to both *Kim* and the reader.

In an interview about his novel *Sacred Games*, Chandra says that he began writing this novel because of his interest in detective fiction. He explains that in the classic cop/detective “we start with an unexplained case/dead body, there is the application of reason by the detective, the studying of clues, he develops a theory and proves it to be true, and at the end all is well – balance has been restored.” Chandra’s description, for the most part, applies to *Kim*, as it does to most other novels in the imperial-adventure genre, in which the resolution of the story coincides with its narrative climax. Chandra overturns the template of the classic cop/detective story by writing an “anti-thriller” of sorts.

In what follows, I argue that Chandra’s novel deconstructs the ideological underpinnings of *Kim* by playing with its formal structure through the aesthetics of *leela* as divine play. Just as Kipling’s adherence to the genre imperialist-adventure novel produces a novel that is overtly committed to the colonial project, I read the aesthetics of *leela* as inflecting not only the narrative form of *Sacred Games*, but also its ideological commitments.<sup>112</sup> The *Advaitin* aesthetic of *leela* is grounded in the notion of lawlessness, randomness and play. Early on in the novel, gangster Gaitonde expounds on the life of the gangster as determined by an arbitrary set of rules. He explicates the notion of “play” that characterizes the game he is implicated in through the board game of Snakes and Ladders.

---

<sup>112</sup> In her essay on the Asian-American spy thriller, Crystal Parikh notes that “Conventional spy narratives have been predominantly concerned with the adventures of the white, usually male, patriotic spy. His agency is linked to the nation-state formation, whose politico-military dominance he is meant to secure” (Parikh 859).

Unlike Kipling's narrative in which following the rules of the game of Hide and Seek results in successful intrigue, following the conventions of Snakes and Ladders does not lead one to success, for "the numbers fell right but the board moves. What is white will be black. Climb high and fast and the long snakes lie waiting. Play the game" (Chandra 60). The metaphor of snakes and ladders could be read as a meta-commentary on the narrative form of the novel, in which each climactic moment contains within it the seeds of its own anticlimax. When Gaitonde marries Subhadra he realizes that he can have sex with every other woman except his wife, who remains outside the domain of his sexual desire. In sexual terms, the climactic moment of desire is eclipsed by an anti-climactic aversion; in terms of narrative structure, the enclosing of one narrative line becomes the fatal opening of another as Gaitonde becomes a slave to his own impotency. Thus, while a climax usually suggests the conclusion of a narrative in *Sacred Games*, the closing of one narrative line is the opening of another. I read the *Dvaitin* aesthetics of *leela* in the doubling of "snakes" and "ladders" which act as mirror images of each other, inverted doubles that are internal to the narrative. This internal doubling therefore destabilizes the narrative conventions of the ordinary spy thriller, where a climactic moment signals the onset of a conclusion and the omniscient narrator makes clear all that has been hitherto obscure to the reader.

This collapse of the rules of form betokens the collapse of all ethical codes of conduct. While the logic of the imperial-adventure narrative ensures that good triumphs over evil, the lack of rules in *Sacred Games* results in moral confusion. Gaitonde's metaphor of Snakes and Ladders could then also be read as a metaphor for the narrative trajectory of characters caught in the web of the "sacred game" for whom

a personal ascent may also simultaneously signify a moral descent.<sup>113</sup> Ideologically, then, the “sacred game” of Chandra’s novel, in which in which white turns into black, good into evil, destabilizes the ideological certainties that underlie the Great Game of Kipling’s narrative.

Just as the *Advaitin* aesthetics of *leela* informs the narrative form and trajectory of the novel, the *Dvaitin* aesthetics of *leela* as doubling is evident in the language of the novel, which is rife with linguistic repetitions. These linguistic repetitions undermine the dichotomy between good and evil that underlies the narrative of *Kim*, as characters on opposing sides of the “sacred game” of cops and robbers repeat the same phrases and in doing so disrupt the reader’s attempt to mark good from evil, right from wrong. This linguistic repetition is reminiscent of the oral tradition of Hindu mythological narratives, in which each character’s speech is marked by key phrases that recur at different points in the narrative to remind the audience of a specific character.<sup>114</sup> However, I argue that in this novel, Chandra uses linguistic repetition to mark the arbitrariness of categories of good and evil and thereby to undermine the moral certitudes that underlie Kipling’s narrative. I focus particularly on the rhetoric of gangster Gaitonde and former intelligence officer K.D. Yadav, and argue that although the two men are on opposing sides of the battlefield they think about their work and life in similar terms.

Chandra characterizes Gaitonde as a character who prides himself on being a man of action, and although Gaitonde assumes a first-person narrative voice, glimpses of Gaitonde’s self-reflection are few. However, when Gaitonde is compelled to fuel communal riots in his beloved city at the behest of the Hindu-right, his identity as a

---

<sup>113</sup> Sartaj’s love for Mary, an instance of his personal ascension leads him to betray Parulkar, his friend and mentor of many years.

<sup>114</sup> When the Hindu oral tradition of animal fables was recorded as a written text named *Panchatantra*, the nested narrative structure from the oral narrative was retained, and hence the text is still marked by the narrator’s repetition of character traits to remind the reader of a specific character.

“secular” gangster comes under scrutiny, as he must redefine himself in the context of his recently acquired religious allegiance, and this provokes a bout of self-reflection:

I had felt anger, and pain, and desire, but I had held back always from allowing the fragments inside me to settle into a shape, a form. ...I had burnt *bastis* [shanty towns], and so I had chosen, I had been forced to choose one side of the battlefield... I knew who I was. I was a Hindu *bhai* [brother/gangster] (Chandra 375).

Gaitonde’s participation in communal riots transforms the violence of gangsters into the masculine Hindu nationalism of the postcolonial nation-state.<sup>115</sup> The militarism inherent in the metaphor of the “battlefield” is realized anew as Gaitonde’s gang war with a rival Muslim gang now becomes a Hindu battle to cleanse the nation-state of its Muslim “other.” By unwittingly participating in a “sacred game” of communal violence, Gaitonde’s identity, the “fragments” of his self coalesce into a Hindu form.

Similarly, when intelligence officer K.D. Yadav reflects on the meaning of his life as a spy in the service of the nation-state, he too uses rhetoric that is inflected with terms such as shape and form: “Remember the dispositions, the distances, in the connections between the points is a shape. The shape is the meaning. In the shape of my life there must be a meaning. What is the shape?” (Chandra 296). Just as Gaitonde’s identity coalesces into a Hindu “form” almost of its own volition, Yadav yearns to make sense of his life by giving it a shape, a form. As an intelligence officer in the service of the nation, Yadav believes that his actions must in some way relate to the narrative of the nation, yet, on his death-bed he is unable to discern such a narrative, thereby suggesting that the narrative of the nation is fragmented, as well.

Just as Gaitonde and Yadav think about their life through the same tropes, they

---

<sup>115</sup> Communal riots refer to clashes between religious groups in the subcontinent. In 1992 Hindu fundamentalists destroyed the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya and this led to extreme violence between Hindus and Muslims, especially in Mumbai, and the incident mentioned in *Sacred Games*, is a reference to this event.

also think of their own death in similar terms. Trapped in a concrete bunker, surrounded by police, Gaitonde knows that his only escape from this bunker is death. Just before he commits suicide he confides in Sartaj: “‘Sartaj you called me yaar. So I’ll tell you something. Build it big or small there is no house that is safe. To win is to lose everything, and the game always wins’ ” (Chandra 42). As a gangster, Gaitonde has no single “house” to call his own, so he begins to identify himself through the nation, which becomes his home. Moments before his death, he suggests that his mortality is a function of the game. Here the game refers to his attempt to find Shukla and prevent him from executing his nuclear holocaust. Having failed to find him, he has lost the “sacred game”; however, the game’s victory means that Mumbai will be consumed by nuclear holocaust, and hence to “win is to lose everything.”

Similarly, on his deathbed, Yadav also frames his mortality in terms of the game. Yadav suffers acute bouts of hallucination, which are punctuated by moments of clarity, and it is in one of these moments that he has a sharp insight into his role in the game: “So the great game is played in the streets and farmlands of Punjab. The game lasts, the game is eternal, the game cannot be stopped, the game gives birth to itself. K.D. plays it, and plays it well” (Chandra 313). The reference to the “farmlands of Punjab” situates the game in a specific space, but as the novel suggests, the game has no one location—it is everywhere. For Yadav, like for Gaitonde, the game plays itself out within the space of the nation-state. The game is an intrinsic part of Yadav’s life, but the disembodied third person narratorial voice makes it distant and removed. Once again, the narrative suggests that the game is greater than its player because it is unstoppable, regenerative and “eternal,” while its player is ultimately mortal. It is significant that both Gaitonde and Yadav think of the game just before their deaths because for both characters the invincibility of the game suggests that their own mortality is ultimately inconsequential.

In the quintessential spy thriller, the intelligence officer is associated with good, and the criminal is associated with evil, yet in Chandra's novel, both characters reflect on their life through a similar discourse. Therefore, the novel suggests that determining what constitutes good and what constitutes evil is ultimately arbitrary, for although the specifics might differ, human beings are finally trapped in similar ethical and philosophical dilemmas. This ethical position suggests that unlike the Great Game of *Kim*, which can be played according to rules which determine good and evil the "sacred game" must be played knowing that "On the field, all actions were only provisionally moral, and the game was eternal" (Chandra 293). This philosophy of "provisional morality" echoes the *Bhagvad Gita*, the sacred text of the Hindus, in which Krishna exhorts Arjuna to take up arms against his kinsmen because ethics are contingent upon circumstances, rather than on any absolute notion of good or evil. Therefore, playing the "sacred game" does not lead to the triumph of good over evil, right over wrong, and by extension the narrative of *Sacred Games* does not offer any narrative resolution.

### Mapping the 'Sacred Game'

As a spy thriller in the imperial-adventure genre, *Kim* and his fellow spies rely heavily on maps to uncover the mysteries of the Great Game. In postcolonial studies, the map has been theorized as a means of territorial conquest, and in his seminal essay, "Allegories of Atlas," Jose Rabasa argues that the map was a key tool of European dominance because it "convey[ed] a planetary strategy wherein knowledge and representation indissolubly institute[d] and erase[d] territories" (Rabasa 361). In keeping with Rabasa's understanding of maps as representations of a "planetary strategy," I argue that in *Kim*, Kipling uses geographical, anthropological and spiritual maps to render the subcontinent geographically and culturally transparent, so that it is

made into a manageable object that can be used for the perpetuation of Empire. Once again, the form through which dominance is exercised, its aesthetic, which in this case is the “map” variously defined, enables the functioning of Empire.<sup>116</sup> I argue that *Sacred Games* subverts the ideological underpinnings of the Great Game by destabilizing Kipling’s aesthetic of the map. In other words, Chandra subverts Kipling’s aesthetic of the map as a tool that enables dominance by creating the map as an opaque object, which obscures knowledge and thus deflects the assertion of power through knowledge.

The map-making enterprise is integral to the Great Game, and therefore, Colonel Creighton the prime mover of the Great Game is both an ethnographer and a cartographer. Edward Said observes that Creighton “embodies the notion that you cannot govern India unless you know India, and to know India means understanding the way it operates” (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 341), and Creighton is committed to uncovering the way that the Orient “operates” by training spies in the Great Game in the art of making geographical and ethnographic “maps.” As *Kim*’s mentor, Creighton believes that *Kim* too must acquire the skills necessary to “operate” the Orient and he thus arranges for *Kim*’s apprenticeship with Lurgan Sahib, an expert in the art of disguises, so that Kim can learn from him the art of making “ethnographic” maps.

Kim learns to disguise himself as a “disciple,” through his apprenticeship with Lurgan Sahib. This disguise enables him to accompany the Lama on his journey into the Himalayas, while simultaneously measuring the terrain to make survey maps for the Great Game. Ironically, although Kim has been the Lama’s disciple from the very beginning of the novel, once he joins the Great Game, he must re-learn the “rules” of

---

<sup>116</sup> In his analysis of the map-making enterprise of empire, Graham Huggan writes: “By de-emphasizing or excluding minority interests, maps reveal themselves as ‘preeminently a language of power, not of protest... The ideological arrows have tended to fly largely in one direction, from the powerful to the weaker in popular, alternative, or subversive modes of expression’ (Harley 300-1)” (Huggan 11).

disciple-ship from Lurgan Sahib, so that he can don it as a disguise in his role as a spy, and thereby acquire the all-important survey maps from French and Russian spies. Thus, in Kipling's narrative, an ethnographic map is easily transformed into a set of rules, whose internalization enables the functioning of the Great Game.

I argue that in keeping with the aesthetic of *leela*, the "sacred game" does not espouse a set of rules, which its players can internalize and perpetuate. Rather, the enterprise of map-making is fraught with difficulties as peoples and places do not acquiesce in the process of map-making. While in Kipling's *Kim*, the disguise of discipleship that enabled Kim to acquire survey maps was premised on the Orientalist fantasy that the white man can easily pass as a "native" when required, in *Sacred Games*, Chandra destabilizes this fantasy by providing an alternative history through which the first survey maps came to be made, in a section tellingly entitled The Great Game. In a lesson to his students, Yadav narrates the history of the nation-state:

Nain and Mani Singh Rawat, and Sarat Chandra Das, and others, small and unsung men who had a century ago plunged into the forbidden northern lands disguised as pilgrims...Prayer-wheels hid compasses, thermometers were snuggled into walking staffs...remember those prayer wheels, one kind of knowledge can conceal another.... Watch everything listen to everything. Useful hides inside useless, truth in lies" (Chandra 293).

Contrary to Kipling's account, this narrative suggests that it was brown men who created the first survey maps of the country. This also suggests that greater stealth was required for the acquisition of survey maps than Kipling suggests for the instruments of survey had to be hidden within quotidian sacred objects. These sacred objects, then, had a dual function. However, while the sacred abets the task of gathering intelligence it is also abetted by it, for the arduous hike through mountainous terrain could be coded as a secular pilgrimage which pays homage to the nation-state. In this narrative,

the sacred serves the purpose of the nation-state and therefore merely replaces Kipling's colonial narrative of map-making with a similar nationalist narrative. However, I suggest that an alternative reading is embedded within the narrative because Yadav urges his protégés to look beyond overt signs, for the hidden method within, as "useful hides within useless."

This aesthetic is made more explicit in the narrative when Yadav explicates the notion of map-making required by the "sacred game." Like Kim, as a spy in the service of the contemporary nation-state, Yadav sets out to the uppermost reaches of the Himalayas, the Sino-Indian border, as part of his training. However, on the journey he wins no victories, conquers no invaders and returns instead only with a renewed sense of his own limitations as a human being. Yadav's "map-making" is substantively different because rather than internalizing or arriving at a set of rules that enable the protection of the nation-state, he returns with an aesthetic through which he perceives the world: "If you can see the connections between data points, see the shape they make, read the story the data is telling, you will win' " he observes (Chandra 291).

This notion of mapping as an active process of connecting disparate points by discovering the pattern that lies between them is in sharp contrast to Creighton's imposition of structure and order onto peoples and spaces to render them into a set of rules, which once internalized can enable the perpetuation of the Great Game. This notion of mapping, then, relies not so much on cartography, but on the discernment of patterns, a mode of perception that coincides with the way in which the devotee aspires to understand *leela*. Just as the devotee attempts to discern meaning, structure and form, in *leela*, the spy too attempts to see meaning in a series of disconnected events, making a "map" of them by drawing connections to create a narrative of the nation-state. However, Chandra's narrative suggests that just as the devotee can never

fully comprehend God's *leela*, similarly, the nation-state cannot be narrativized.

In Kipling's novel, the narrative of the nation is created through the survey maps that *Kim* acquires in his guise as the Lama's disciple. *Kim* acquires the survey maps only because the French and Russian spies grab at the Lama's *mandala*, his map of the spiritual world, and in the ensuing tussle, *Kim* wrests not only the *mandala* from them but also the all-important survey maps. The Lama's *mandala* therefore indirectly abets the Great Game in its narrativization of the nation. I argue that Chandra's narrative self-consciously gestures to the impossibility of narrativizing the nation by creating the *mandala* of his novel as an indecipherable sign that resists interpretation. Police officer Sartaj Singh comes across five Tibetan monks drawing a *mandala* and ponders on the eventual shape that it will assume:

Inside the final circle there were going to be several independent regions, ovals, each with its own scene of figures, human and animal and godly.

Between these ovals, at the very center of the entire wheel, there was a shape, Sartaj couldn't make out what it was (Chandra 222).

I read the *mandala* as a literal and figurative representation of the "sacred game." Literally, the *mandala* acts as a map of the "sacred game," outlining its players and their relationships in a complex spiritual cosmos. Just like the "sacred game," each segment of the *mandala* contains its own self-contained world, which is at once removed from other worlds and connected to them. More abstractly, it acts as a metatextual commentary on the impenetrable nature of the "sacred game," which remains obscure to all its players as well as to the reader.

Just like Sartaj, the reader must piece together the disparate elements of the "sacred game" to make sense of the novel as a whole. Once again, form informs meaning. Since the form of the *mandala* cannot be comprehended, its meaning too remains obscured. In *Kim*, the *mandala* enables the perpetuation of the Great Game.

Therefore, if we read Sartaj's failed attempt to narrativize the *mandala* in this context, it suggests that the *mandala* of this novel deters comprehension of the "sacred game" because it renders it opaque. Consequently, the *mandala* cannot be utilized to narrativize the nation.

### Constructions of the Sacred

In this section, I argue that the colonial binary between the "passive-feminine-spiritual" Orient and the "active-masculine-secular" Occident, which propels the Great Game of Kipling's narrative, is confounded by the militant Hinduism that underlies the "sacred game" of Chandra's narrative. While Kipling's novel describes the sacred as passive and feminine and therefore by extension as irrational, in *Sacred Games*, the sacred is described in terms of masculine militarism and consequently scientific rationality.<sup>117</sup> I argue further that just as the Lama represents the "weak" and "passive" spiritual Orient in *Kim*, Swami Shukla, the holy man of Chandra's novel and the mastermind behind the "sacred game," represents the postcolonial state's inevitable imbrication in the sacred.

I argue that the Lama's spiritual alterity removes him from the machinations of the Great Game, and therefore by extension, the Orient too is removed from the Great Game of international espionage. As an imperial-adventure novel, the narrative of *Kim* necessitates a clear delineation of characters into good and evil conveniently thrusting those who threaten the sovereignty of empire into the category of evil and those who safeguard it into the category of good. The Lama, in this schema, is a neutral character who stands outside the machinations of the Great Game because he does not abet the game or obstruct it, but remains outside its purview almost entirely. As Srinivas

---

<sup>117</sup> This idea of the passive, effete Orient was common in Orientalist discourse. As Hansen writes in his analysis of the Orientalist roots of Hindu fundamentalism: "Hegel endorsed the view that India was essentially Hindu, understood as pure spirit, but spirit of the imaginative (soft, feminine) sort, thus of a lower logical order than the rational (masculine) spirit of the West" (Hansen 68).

Aravamudan cogently argues in *Guru English*, the Lama of Kipling's narrative represents an alterity that runs parallel to the narrative of empire but is not subsumed by it for "there are peripheral recognitions of spiritual alterity and charlatanry in Kipling's work uncompromised by imperial commitments" (Aravamudan 67).

I argue that in the novel, the Lama's alterity is suggested by the nature of his quest. While the other characters in the novel are deeply involved in the Great Game, the Lama is absorbed in his spiritual quest for the River of the Arrow. The Orientalist narrator of the novel suggests that the Lama "was prepared to spend serene years in his quest; having nothing of the white man's impatience, but a great faith" (Kipling 126). This Orientalist perspective on the Lama's faith and his patience not only foregrounds the Lama's detachment from the world, but also simultaneously foregrounds the Lama's difference from the white man. While the white man's "impatience" suggests that he is an active agent of his destiny, the Lama's "faith" suggests passivity in contrast.

In the context of the narrative, the Lama's alterity is further emphasized by the narrator who frames him in an Orientalist schema of holy men. The narrator knowingly informs the reader that "all India is full of holy men stammering gospels in strange tongues; shaken and consumed in the fires of their own zeal; dreamers, babblers, and visionaries: as it has been from the beginning and will continue to the end" (Kipling 80). The holy men of India, of whom the Lama is one, are characterized as "dreamers," an adjective that suggests that their spirituality has uprooted them from the real world. The narrator emphasizes their alterity by suggesting that their spirituality has made them childlike because like children who cannot articulate themselves in complete sentences they "babble" and "stammer." Furthermore, just as children cannot control their senses, the holy men of India cannot control their experience of the spiritual, which is described through passive verbs---they are

“shaken” and “consumed” by their own “zeal.” Through this description, the Lama is rendered as effeminate, irrational and childlike, a condition he cannot alter because the holy men of India have always been like this.

Furthermore, I argue that the Lama’s spirituality escapes the ambit of empire because it is situated in a Buddhist epistemology or what Aravamudan terms “Buddhology” that Kipling clearly demarcates as beyond the world of ordinary mortals.<sup>118</sup> As part of the Lama’s Buddhology, the Lama instructs Kim in humility: “‘There is no pride,’ said the lama, after a pause, ‘there is no pride among such as follow the Middle way.’” (Kipling 91). The Lama therefore is not only childlike, but as a follower of the Middle Way is also free of pride. Therefore, throughout the narrative the Lama makes no effort to insinuate himself in the workings of the world. Although the Lama exists in the material world, he is not of it. In keeping with his “Buddhology,” the Lama understands the Game as simply one more instance of the ephemeral world of material objects, and he therefore participates in it even as he is removed from it; he funds Kim’s education but has no knowledge of what such an education entails; he accompanies Kim to the uppermost reaches of the Himalayas but remains unaware that Kim makes this journey to acquire survey maps for the perpetuation of the Great Game.

In Kipling’s schema, the Lama’s childlike nature and his Buddhology both ensure that he is removed from the machinations of the Great Game. Since the Orient is an extension of the Lama it too is characterized as “effeminate,” “irrational” and “timeless.” Therefore, just as the Lama requires Kim to protect him from the world, the Orient needs the Occident to protect it from the designs of French and Russian

---

<sup>118</sup> In his book, *Guru English*, Srinivas Aravamudan defines Buddhology as “The specific vocabulary of South Asian religious universalism...[which] translates certain protonationalist expectations effectively into English, even as it makes visible indigenous self-perceptions regarding empire and religion” (Aravamudan 79).

spies, who threaten the sovereignty of Empire.<sup>119</sup> In contrast, I argue that in *Sacred Games*, Shukla's assertion of masculine militarism counters the notion of an effete Orient, his invocation of scientific rationality counters the colonial conflation of spirituality with irrationality, and his atavistic history of Hindu militarism counters the notion of a timeless Orient. From this it might seem that Chandra merely replaces Kipling's colonial binaries with Shukla's nationalist binaries, which are similar to those promulgated by the Hindu-right.<sup>120</sup> However, I argue that the novel works ultimately to undermine Shukla's nationalist binaries because despite Shukla's rhetoric he is unable to finally achieve the "sacred game" of his vision. While in *Kim*, the passive-weak nation-state is ultimately saved by the players of the Great Game, in *Sacred Games*, the active-strong nation-state mobilizes its intelligence forces to save itself.

In *Guru English*, Srinivas Aravamudan argues that in response to the Orientalist criticism of India as a country steeped in regressive spirituality, both Hindu nationalist and spiritual leaders recuperated Hindu spirituality for the purpose of nation-building, and that this rhetoric was steeped in a discourse of virile, violent masculinity to counter the colonial notion of the passive and effete Orient. The Hindu-right wing of the contemporary nation-state has inherited this legacy because its ideology is also based "on the legitimacy of violence, armed and violent insurrection,

---

<sup>119</sup> In *Whose India?* Teresa Hubel argues that for Kipling imperialism is always coded in terms of masculinity, "It is significant that the work of the Empire is consistently depicted in Kipling as the property of British men rather than of British people. Moreover, his work ethic is masculine both in its inclusion of men only and in its tendency to emphasize the type of work that British men of the nineteenth century would have engaged in, jobs associated with the government administration, the military, and with the British secret service" (Hubel 36).

<sup>120</sup> The destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque in 1992 propelled the Hindu Right into the center of nationalist politics where it has remained ever since. Presently, the Hindu Right comprises of a number of different political parties of which the BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party) is the largest. The beginnings of the Hindu right can be traced to the writings of V.D. Savarkar, who imagined a political militant Hinduism. For more details on the history of the Hindu Right see Chetan Bhatt's *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, ideologies and Modern Myths*; for more details on the Hindu Right in contemporary politics see Thomas Blom Hansen's *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*.

militarism and its associated masculine aesthetic” (Bhatt 79).

Similarly, in *Sacred Games*, Shukla equates peace with effeminate weakness and exhorts Ganesh to “resist this so-called peace which emasculates spirituality and makes it weak” (Chandra 547). In contrast to Kipling’s Lama for whom pride is a sin for those who follow the Middle Way, Shukla espouses a notion of spirituality, which is replete with a sense of Hindu pride because Shukla believes that the true Hindu will assert violence to regain his lost power. This understanding of violence as an assertion of masculinity is in keeping with the Hindu right wing rhetoric of militarism.<sup>121</sup>

This conjoining of spirituality, violence and masculinity becomes explicit when Shukla codes his plan of nuclear annihilation in the metaphor of the *yajna* [religious sacrifice]:

If you are the *yajman* [man], all of you, then what you are sacrificing is your own selves, your bodies, you. What we put into the fire are merely substitutes, which the gods accept. What is being sacrificed is you. You are *Purusha* [man]. You must die, so that the universe may live (Chandra 561).

The rhetorical reiteration of the self that is sacrificed as “selves, your bodies, you” is a reference to ego, body and soul, the three components of the self, which according to Hindu philosophy tie *purusha* [man] to the world, and by letting go of these, man may attain *moksha* or freedom from the cycle of birth and death.<sup>122</sup> Shukla deftly interweaves *moskha* into the discourse of nuclear annihilation to suggest that man’s liberation depends on his acquiescence to the annihilation of the universe. The *yagna* then acts as a self-conscious staging of the apocalypse Shukla plans to launch in which

---

<sup>121</sup> This notion of masculine militarism is common to the rhetoric of the Hindu Right. Gowalker (the founder of the RSS) urges his fellow Hindus to defend their country like men: “Let us shake off the present-day emasculating notions and become real living men, bubbling with national pride, living and breathing the grand ideas of service, self-reliance and dedication in the cause of our dear and sacred mother-land...Today more than anything else, mother needs such men—young, intelligent, dedicated and more than all virile and masculine. And such are the men who make history—men with capital ‘M’” (Golwalkar 587-588; quoted in Hansen 83).

<sup>122</sup> *Moksha* in Hindu philosophy is *nirvana* in Buddhist philosophy

*purusha* [man] must die so that “the universe may live.” Shukla’s rhetoric of sacrificing the self for the good of the nation reflects the rhetoric of V.D. Savarkar, the founder of the Hindu-Right, whose legacy continues to inform the Hindu right-wing politics of the contemporary nation-state.<sup>123</sup> Historian Romila Thapar argues that the Hindu right of contemporary India have given rise to a “new form of Hinduism, militant, aggressive and crusading...[called] Syndicated Hinduism” (Thapar 160). Shukla’s philosophical exposition reinforces the discourse of “Syndicated Hinduism” both in its aggressive, masculine rhetoric of violence and in its political ideology of a “Hindu nation.”

To justify the violence of its ideology, the Hindu-right also situates its rhetoric in the vocabulary of modernity, which it links with the discourse of “scientific rationality.” The linkage of modernity with science and science with rationality enables the Hindu right to claim that violence is the rational solution for the problems attendant on the modern day nation-state.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, in *Sacred Games*, Shukla is at pains to justify the violence enacted by the “sacred game,” and he therefore embeds his discourse on the “sacred” in pseudo-scientific vocabulary. This attempt at placing the sacred within the framework of the rational is in sharp contrast to Kipling’s vision of the sacred as necessarily irrational.

Shukla explains his vision to a skeptical Gaitonde by talking of “electrons and their charges, and strange attractions and repulsions. There were parts of what he was saying that came to [Gaitonde] only as a sonorous hymn” (Chandra 548). Here, I read a symbiotic relationship between science and spirituality: if the discourse of science

---

<sup>123</sup> “Men, groups and races are in the process of consolidation under the stern law of nature, to get forged into that larger existence on the anvil of war through struggle and sacrifice. Those alone who can stand this fierce ordeal will prove their fitness, not only the moral but even the physical fitness that entitles races and types to survive in this world” (Savarkar xii; quoted in Hansen 79).

<sup>124</sup> In *Guru English*, Aravamudan argues that the Hindu Right used science to justify its ideology: “Shoring up a base in religious discourses, neo-Hinduism sought to appropriate science and modernity to its camp, taking control of a state-centered nationalism in the process” (Aravamudan 143).

can be used to justify spirituality, the discourse of spirituality too reifies science and makes it transcendental, a “sonorous hymn.” This transcendentalization of science effectively erases reason from the equation, and therefore mesmerizes its listener into compliance. Paradoxically, this discourse of pseudo-scientific spirituality appeals to its listener precisely because science is associated with rationality and by association with modernity. This discourse of “modernity” therefore justifies the violence of Shukla’s vision as necessary for the “progress” of the modern postcolonial nation-state.

However, this discourse of violence acquires legitimacy only when it is also grounded in an imagined golden Hindu past, in which great Hindu warriors always exerted violence to destroy the forces of evil. Shukla narrates the legend of the great sage Shankaracharya, who willfully destroyed Karakaca, an impudent challenger of his spiritual authority, as well as the story of the *Sanyasi* rebellion where *Sanyasis* [holy men] fought the East India Company after the Bengal famine of 1770. Drawing liberally from Hindu mythology and nationalist history, Shukla’s justifications resonate with the Hindu-right wing ideology of the postcolonial nation-state which justifies itself by simultaneously appealing to a glorious mythic past and the promise of a golden future. In contrast to the Lama’s timeless spirituality, which exists outside of history, Shukla’s references to both history and mythology, however dubious, place his “sacred game” in a telos, which situates it within a contemporary political context.

In *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad discusses the discourse of secularism in the formation of the contemporary postcolonial nation-state. One of the ways in which the nation-state regulates its secular philosophy is by classifying and regulating the space of religion in the nation. He suggests that “the space that religion may properly occupy in society has to be continually redefined by the law because the reproduction of secular life within and beyond the nation-state continually affects the discursive clarity of that space (Asad 201). The introduction of religion in the space of

governance, for instance, threatens to disrupt the foundations on which the secular state has been built. In this context, Swami Shukla's dangerous masculine militarism, his scientific discourse on spirituality and his atavistic history suggest that there can be no spirituality removed from the politics of the postcolonial nation-state. Therefore, in contrast to *Kim*, the politics of Chandra's novel suggest that the violence of the nation-state is an integral part of the colonial and postcolonial nation-state and it cannot be jettisoned into an alterity. The novel's resonance with contemporary politics further reinforces the relevance of religion in the postcolonial nation.

#### Overturning Power: The *Guru*[Teacher]-*Chela* [Disciple] dynamic

As I have argued above, the Lama represents the "weak" and "passive" spiritual Orient, and Kim represents the "strong" and "active" Occident who protects the Lama from all harm. Although the Lama is Kim's teacher, he still requires Kim's protection, and I argue that this relationship re-establishes the power dynamic inherent in the colonial enterprise. If we read the narrative of *Sacred Games* as a palimpsestic rewriting of *Kim* through the aesthetic of *leela*, then Shukla's character acts as the narrative double of the Lama's character, and as his disciple Gaitonde acts as Kim's double. In *Sacred Games* the dynamic between Shukla and Gaitonde seems to follow the traditional *guru* [teacher]-*chela* [disciple] relationship as Shukla indoctrinates Gaitonde into his philosophy of *leela*. However, I argue that at the end of the novel, this dynamic is overturned because the very rhetoric of *leela* that Shukla uses to manipulate Gaitonde ultimately leads to Shukla's own downfall.

In Kipling's schema the Lama's Buddhology makes him innocent and unprepossessing, and on first meeting him, Kim describes him as, "a child" (Kipling 61), who innocently gives *Kim* his begging bowl, the symbol of his renunciation as well as the only means of his subsistence. In doing so, the Lama reinforces the

colonial stereotype of the guileless spiritual leader who needs the assistance of the colonizer to realize himself.<sup>125</sup> Therefore, although the Lama is Kim's *guru* or teacher he appears as effete supplicant and child, requiring the "protection" of the state, while Kim asserts both masculinity and dominance in his role as the colonizer-master.

However, at the end of the novel, when the Lama finds the River of the Arrow, he asserts himself as Kim's spiritual mentor. The Lama's Buddhology requires him to lead his disciple to the path of Enlightenment, and therefore, on finding the River of the Arrow, the Lama hesitates from jumping in and attaining *nirvana* [freedom from the cycle of birth and death] for himself. Instead he urges Kim to come with him, so that he may fulfill his role as *guru*: "'Sun of my Soul, I have wrenched my Soul back from the Threshold of Freedom to free thee from all sin—as I am free, and sinless! Just is the Wheel! Certain is our deliverance! Come!'" (Kipling 338). The Lama's invocation of the "Wheel" of birth and death and his rhetoric of "Deliverance" from all sin make the Lama the Orientalist stereotype of the "Eastern" *guru* who is single-mindedly devoted to his spiritual quest. This "pure" spirituality is therefore able to act as an antidote to the materialism of the Occident, as the Lama offers to rescue Kim from the material excesses of the Great Game.<sup>126</sup> This moment in the narrative then overturns the dynamic of benevolent paternalism and introduces in its stead the possibility of a true *guru-chela* relationship in which the *chela* submits to the will of

---

<sup>125</sup> This dynamic is reinforced also in the Lama's interaction with the curator of the Lahore museum who acknowledges the native subject's authority on spiritual matters with a mixture of respect and condescension. Although both men are equally knowledgeable about Eastern spirituality, Kipling privileges the curator's academic scholarship wrought through years of research rather than the Lama's spiritual knowledge wrought through devotion in their interaction for it is the curator's topographical knowledge made available through the colonial obsession with mapping that enables the Lama to locate the River of the Arrow and to fulfill his spiritual quest; the colonized's "deficiency," his lack of geographical knowledge requires the "protection" of the colonial state.

<sup>126</sup> As Said argues in *Orientalism*, the Orientalist project was grounded in the belief that the East and West were different because the former was spiritual and the latter material. Thus, scholars such as Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis "urged upon their countrymen, and upon Europeans in general, a detailed study of India because, they said, it was Indian culture and religion that could defeat the materialism and mechanism (and republicanism) of Occidental culture. And from this defeat would arise a new, revitalized Europe (Said 115).

his teacher in the hope of attaining *nirvana*. Yet both dynamics are squarely within the framework of colonial desire where the Lama variously enacts the role of passive supplicant and spiritual savior as required by the Great Game.

While the Lama is characterized by his detachment from material possessions and a complete unfamiliarity with the machinations of the Game, Swami Shukla, though seemingly detached from the material world, is deeply involved in it<sup>127</sup> for he is the prime mover of the “sacred game” of the novel. Swami Shukla desires to annihilate the corruption of the world through a nuclear holocaust, to make space for a new Hindu nation<sup>128</sup>. Shukla realizes his apocalyptic vision of the future by manipulating his disciple Gaitonde into carrying arms and nuclear material into the country. Although Gaitonde is a shrewd gangster he is drawn into Shukla’s web because Shukla gives his life meaning through his spiritual expositions of *leela*: ““We dance along the lines of his *leela* [divine play]. Birth, life, death, all has a shape, even if you can’t see it”” (Chandra 531) Shukla observes to Gaitonde, and induces him to look for “shape” in the flow of his life.

Gaitonde becomes vulnerable to Shukla’s ideology precisely because he is unable to discern the “shape” of Shukla’s “sacred game.” As Gaitonde participates in Shukla’s notion of *leela*, planning major shootouts according to the discernment of “patterns” in his life, he ironically becomes blind to his enmeshment in a larger *leela*, one orchestrated by Shukla himself. I argue that this error occurs because Gaitonde reads his relationship with Shukla through the frame of the conventional *guru-chela*

---

<sup>127</sup> Although Shukla ostensibly disavows attachment from material objects, his temples, property and financial assets attest to his imbrication in the material world.

<sup>128</sup> Shukla’s post-apocalyptic is similar to the colonial notion of empty “virgin” lands, on which the colonizer/*guru* can exert his influence to shape a brave new world. As Huggan argues in his analysis of colonial maps: “In fostering the notion of a socially empty space, the blank map was fully exploited by the colonizers of the new, ‘virgin’ lands; blanks map proved equally valuable to the commercial and geopolitical agents of imperialism in countries such as Africa and India, which, although densely populated, could be impersonally refashioned for the purposes of political control and economic gain” (Huggan 9).

relationship, in which the *guru* strives only for his disciples' enlightenment, and not for his own material gain, and therefore Gaitonde never suspects that Shukla has other designs on his life.

Gaitonde's complete subservience to Shukla makes him psychologically and emotionally vulnerable to him, and this enables Shukla to manipulate him with ease. This becomes evident when Shukla is able to recognize Gaitonde despite his plastic surgery which gives him a wholly new face. As a tool of the modern nation-state, plastic surgery not only replaces disguise as a mode of concealment, but it also enables characters to embody different personas. Earlier on in the novel, Gaitonde sponsors his mistress Zoya Mirza's, plastic surgery, which enables her to become a supermodel. Zoya's physical transformation is concomitant with her psychological transformation—the more beautiful she is, the more unattainable she becomes. Gaitonde undergoes a similar transformation after his plastic surgery. While his plastic surgery fools even those closest to him, it does not fool Swami Shukla, who is able to look beyond the disguise and recognize him. This moment in the narrative signals Gaitonde's psychological transformation: from being a self-assured gangster he becomes a dependent disciple.

Just as the Lama offers his disciple, *Kim*, the possibility of a spiritual re-birth, Swami Shukla makes Gaitonde anew by recognizing him through his "disguise." This suggests that Shukla has gained access to every crevice of Gaitonde's being, for he looks beyond the outer physical layer and gains knowledge of his soul as a true *Guru* must. To commemorate his spiritual rebirth Shukla renames Gaitonde Arjuna, after the mythic warrior of the *Mahabharata*. Upon abandoning his home as a young boy, Gaitonde had changed his birth name Kiran, [lit. a ray of light], to Ganesh, a reference to the god Ganesh who is the destroyer of obstacles. This renaming enabled Gaitonde to make himself anew as like the god, he destroyed all obstacles that came in the way

of his success. By choosing the name Arjuna, the mythic warrior of the *Mahabharata*, Shukla reconfigures Gaitonde's identity. Just as Krishna exhorts Arjuna to take up arms against his own family in the *Mahabharata*, Shukla induces Gaitonde, now "Arjuna" to wage a battle against his own city for the greater good of the Hindu "nation."

Thus, Gaitonde moves from being a gangster interested only in profit to an ardent disciple devoted to Shukla's battle, his "sacred game." In the discourse of liberal secularism, unquestioning obedience to religious authority has been unanimously condemned because it contradicts the liberal ideology of the "right of the individual to the pursuit of happiness and self-creation" (Asad 198). The assumption here is that disciplines of disciple-ship are necessarily antithetical to the individual's self-realization. However, Gaitonde's obedience is in keeping with the notion of *dharma* promulgated by this episode in the *Mahabharata*. Here, Krishna tells Arjuna that his free will is irrelevant to the cosmic order for the outcome of the battle has already been decided before he fights it.<sup>129</sup> He must fight the battle because it is his duty to do so. This notion of complete obedience, then, contradicts the secular ideology of the contemporary postcolonial nation-state.

Although the *Mahabharata* has been the ur-text for South Asian postcolonial writers<sup>130</sup> in thinking through nation-formation through diversity,<sup>131</sup> Chandra gestures to its usurpation by the Hindu-right wing to justify the violence of the postcolonial

---

<sup>129</sup> "It would be cowardly of him to flee the battlefield. A refusal to fight would also be a failure to acknowledge that the battle was inevitable and that its fate had been decided by the actions of the antagonists from many years ago. The divine Krishna had already foreordained the mass slaughter that was to follow in the next eighteen days of the battle, and his role as the ninth incarnation (avatara) of Vishnu had been to root out the rampant unrighteousness (adharmā) present in the Kaurava armies led by Arjuna's cousin Duryodhana" (Aravamudan 149).

<sup>130</sup> Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* embeds the Indian national movement within the narrative of the *Mahabharata* to suggest that the latter is integral to understanding the contemporary South Asian nation-state.

<sup>131</sup> For more details on critical studies on this phenomenon see Judith Plotz's "Rushdie's pickle and the new Indian historical novel: Sealy, Singh, Tharoor, and national metaphor"; Jon Mee's "After midnight: the Indian novel in English of the 80s and 90s."

nation-state. Gaitonde's acquiescence to his re-birth unwittingly makes him complicit in Shukla's Hindu nationalist ideology, for he aids Shukla's project by transporting nuclear materials into India, but does not realize that they will be used to annihilate his beloved city, Mumbai. When Gaitonde realizes that Shukla has manipulated him, he realizes that Shukla does not really care for him: "I was nothing to him. He flew far above the highest flight of any jet, and looked down on us as if on ants" (Chandra 778). Gaitonde's vision of Shukla as an all-overseeing god, who plays with the lives of ordinary mortals, who are mere "ants" in his vision of the cosmos, is the realization of Shukla's *leela*. Although Shukla has been overtly propounding the notion of *leela* as the play of God, Gaitonde realizes that Shukla himself acts as a demi-god of the novel, manipulating his disciples and directing events from afar to achieve his vision of *pralay* [apocalypse].

However, ironically enough, Shukla's rhetoric of *leela* ultimately results in the failure of the "sacred game." Gaitonde overpowered by Shukla's apocalyptic vision comes to believe that Shukla plans to annihilate Mumbai through a nuclear holocaust, and he therefore decides to kill himself before he can be ravaged by Shukla's nuclear explosion. However, Gaitonde's death leads to an investigation, which results in the discovery of Shukla's plan to annihilate Mumbai. The national intelligence service steps in just in time and prevents Shukla from realizing his "sacred game." Thus, the narrative of *leela*, which propels the "sacred game" also ironically, results in its failure.

#### Sacred/Secular

In *Sacred Games*, Chandra, like many other postcolonial writers, rewrites a canonical text within a postcolonial-postmodern framework to deconstruct the formal,

ideological and epistemological framework of the canonical text.<sup>132</sup> Formally, the aesthetic of *leela* deconstructs the genre of the conventional spy thriller by positing in its stead the postmodern “anti-thriller,” which aims not to satisfy the reader with a neat conclusion, but provokes her to question the divide between the sacred and the secular. Similarly, Chandra uses the politics of *leela* to undermine the colonial ideology that underlies the map-making enterprise of empire by creating the map as an opaque object that defies any attempt to read it. Finally, Chandra re-defines the epistemological underpinnings of the sacred in the contemporary postcolonial nation-state by having a Hindu god man utilize the ideology of *leela* to realize his vision of nuclear annihilation.

Through this paper, I have argued that the novel’s narrative form, its aesthetic of *leela*, informs the ideological underpinnings of the “sacred game.” I now move the discussion a step further to ask: in what way does the novel’s imbrication in multiple literary traditions inform its political commitments? In other words, what are the implications of the novel’s postmodern-postcolonial aesthetics for the politics of the postcolonial nation-state? In keeping with the aesthetic of *leela* that informs the narrative form of the novel, I suggest that the cartography of the novel can be uncovered by discerning patterns and repetitions in the linguistic and structural form of the novel. As discussed above, these patterns gesture to its resonances with canonical English literary texts, as well as with indigenous literary and religious texts.

Chandra’s novel is implicated in the English literary tradition because it rewrites *Kim*, a major British canonical text. At the same time, it incorporates narrative and formal elements from indigenous literary and religious texts such as the *Panchatantra*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagvad Gita* within its framework to

---

<sup>132</sup> Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* rewrites Shakespeare’s *Othello*; Aime Cesaire’s *A Tempest* rewrites Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*; Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* rewrites Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*

suggest that these indigenous literatures enable a productive engagement with the diverse ethnic/religious differences in the region. Therefore, *Sacred Games* novel draws on both English and indigenous literary and historical traditions to provide an alternative genealogy for the contemporary postcolonial novel, in keeping with the work of other postcolonial novelists such as Shashi Tharoor and Salman Rushdie. The aesthetics of the novel therefore prevent a wholly atavistic reading and/or wholly modernist reading of the text because they suggest that the sacred is an integral part of the framework of the modern and that any reading must account for this complexity. In troubling the sacred/secular divide aesthetically, the novel also suggests that this divide is suspect politically.

Published in 2007, the plot of *Sacred Games* seems oddly prescient in view of the recent Malegaon blasts (September 29, 2008) and the recent terrorist attacks on Mumbai (November 26, 2008) both of which were propelled by religious ideology. In the first, two bombs went off in Malegaon, Maharashtra killing eight people and injuring eighty. The Anti-Terrorism Squad discovered that the blasts had been engineered by a group of *sadvhis* or holy men and women under the umbrella of *Abhinav Bharat Sanasthan* [Society for a New India], a Hindu-right wing organization. In the second event, a group of men hijacked several hotels in Mumbai and killed a hundred and seventy three people and injured three hundred and eight. The attacks were traced back to *Lashkar-e-Taiba* [Army of the Good], a Muslim terrorist organization based in Pakistan.

Chandra was interviewed shortly after the Mumbai terrorist attack, and in the interview he comments on the Malegaon blasts:

I've had a strange feeling of déjà vu over the last few weeks, as Hemant Karkare and the ATS [Anti-Terrorism Squad] released details of the alleged involvement of various swamis in the Malegaon blasts; of course I was

reminded of the Swami in *Sacred Games* who yearns for a final conflict, an apocalypse. (Chandra “A Welter Of Images And Thoughts And Questions” par.1)

In the context of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, Chandra’s comments on the Malegaon blasts impel us to consider the link between the two events. While on the surface the two events seem completely disconnected—one orchestrated by a Hindu right wing group in India and the other organized by a Muslim terrorist organization in Pakistan--I argue that both attacks were motivated by religious ideology. As we have come to know through news reports and interviews, the men responsible for the terrorist attack on Mumbai were misguided into believing that their actions would usher in a golden age, a narrative of apocalypse that is eerily similar to the one which propels Swami Shukla’s “sacred game.” Despite the secular rhetoric of Indian nation and its attempts to cleanse itself of the “sacred” *Sacred Games* suggests that the sacred remains an integral part of the fabric of the nation-state.

Sacred Subjects:  
Writing the Sacred in the Secular State

The specter of Charulata, the protagonist of Rabindranath Tagore's *Nashtanir* [The Broken Nest], haunts this project. In my introduction I gestured to Charulata as a figure whose unrealized, inchoate desire for companionship and her illicit yet never fully realized liaison with her brother-in-law disrupts Chatterjee and Chakrabarty's claims about the asexual, apolitical *kulalakshmi*. Just as Charulata's sexual desires exceed the frame of wifehood set out for her by *bhadralok* society, the *bhadralok* widow's desire for *satita* and the *tawaiif*'s desire for respectability exceed gender roles mapped out for them by their societies. In what follows I contend that they are sidelined from narratives of the nation because they are female subaltern subjects whose self-realization is wrought through the sacred, an episteme which has historically been discarded in narratives of the nation. Following this, I suggest that the contemporary genre in which history is written elides experiences of the every day and the ordinary, which contain experiences of the sacred. I then go on to suggest that narrative forms derived from sacred traditions offer alternative modes for writing the history of the subcontinent.

From the outset, colonial discourse situated the Orient's otherness in its "spirituality," and thinkers from Marx to Hegel thought of India as essentially spiritual and therefore as passive and feminine.<sup>133</sup> This dichotomization between the spiritual East and the material West enabled the British to conceive of empire as necessary for the "protection" of the colony from its own regressive spirituality, which threatened to

---

<sup>133</sup> In his essay "On Imperialism in India" Marx suggests that India came to be conquered by England because India's passive, unchanging nature made her incapable of resistance. He writes: "Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society" (Marx 659).

subsume it.<sup>134</sup> Therefore, the colonial state secularized the nation-state by cleansing religion from the body politic, and jettisoning it into the sphere of private. While a uniform civil code was established to deal with matters of the state, a set of personal laws were established to deal with the private sphere. The British codified a fluid set of Hindu<sup>135</sup> and Muslim<sup>136</sup> religious practices into laws which they then used to govern the population. This legacy of the separation between the private/spiritual and the public/secular has been bequeathed to the postcolonial nation-state. Following the colonial model, the postcolonial nation-state has been avowedly secularist in its attempt to deal with the problem of religion in the nation-state, and has come under much criticism from secularists and sectarianist for its attempts to mediate between personal law and the uniform civil code.<sup>137</sup>

This dichotomization of the nation into the private/sacred and public/secular has been transmitted to theorizations of the nation, as well. Partha Chatterjee's formulation of the nation is a case in point. Chatterjee's theory, which has been very influential for recent theoretical analyses of the nation, is based on Bankimchandra's colonial history of the nation, in which the (Hindu) Indian nation is essentially spiritual, while the Western world is material. Bankimchandra's dichotomization reflects his own anxieties about his role in the colonial state because he was a Deputy Magistrate by profession and a staunch Hindu Brahmin by faith, two roles which themselves reinforce the schematic delineation of material/Western and spiritual/Indian. In his own formulation of the nation, Chatterjee retains Bankimchandra's essential dichotomy between the spiritual "East" and the "material"

---

<sup>134</sup> A slew of British novels from Rider Haggard's *She* to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* represent the colony as an unknowable place whose dark forces threaten to consume Empire.

<sup>135</sup> See Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*

<sup>136</sup> See Samita Sen's discussion of *nikkah* laws for Muslims in "Offences against Marriage."

<sup>137</sup> See Ania Loomba's discussion of Roop Kanwar's decision to become a *sati* in "Dead Women Tell No Tales: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and Post-Colonial Writings on Widow Immolation in India"

West, but transfers it instead to the domain of the “inner” and “outer” sphere of Bengali society and genders it. Chatterjee’s nationalist model then is based on a model determined by the nascent nationalism of the Indian bourgeoisie, and therefore, it too reflects the nationalist anxiety to distinguish the Indian nation from the British Empire.

This dichotomization of the sacred and the secular has resulted in a worrying tendency to either ignore the dimension of the sacred even when discussing subjects that are explicitly sacred or to flatten out experiences of the sacred through liberal, secular readings.<sup>138</sup> In *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad traces this tendency to romanticize resistance to the way that agency has been formulated: “Given the essential freedom, or the natural sovereignty, of the human subject, and given, too, its own desires and interests, what should human beings do to realize their freedom, empower themselves, and choose pleasure” (Asad 71)? Hence, if liberal, secular discourse equates agency with freedom, choice and pleasure, it necessarily construes subjugation, obedience and pain with the absence of agency.

Building upon Saba Mahmood’s critique of secular liberalism and theorizations of the female pious subject’s mode of exercising agency, this dissertation has argued that the subaltern subject implicated in the sacred realizes herself through the very frames that suggest her disempowerment within liberal, secular discourse.<sup>139</sup> In other words, I have argued that the female subject seeks her self-realization through sacred epistemologies that valorize subjugation, obedience and pain. This reading of agency disrupts the telos of liberal humanism which suggests that human beings are “naturally” inclined to seek self-realization through freedom. The political history of the subcontinent, which Chakrabarty, following Marx, calls History 1, maintains the

---

<sup>138</sup> See Ania Loomba’s essay “Dead Women Tell no Tales” in which she discusses sati without considering it as an act of devotion.

<sup>139</sup> “Freedom is normative to feminism, as it is to liberalism, and critical scrutiny is applied to those who want to limit women’s freedom rather than those who want to extend it” (Mahmood 10).

same biases, and the introduction of the sacred therefore disrupts its narrative teleology, as well.<sup>140</sup>

In Chapter 2, I read the Bengali widow's devotion as drawn primarily from Mirabai's sacred epistemology of subjugation. While upper-caste Hindu male Brahmins acted as the intermediaries between mankind and god in fifteenth century Rajput society, Mirabai's *bhajans* [devotional songs] suggested that union with God did not need elaborate sacrifices or rituals because it could be attained simply through a willing and complete subjugation to the will of God.<sup>141</sup> Mirabai's philosophy therefore inverted the power dynamic inherent within Brahmanical society by suggesting that those who are already subaltern--the *shudras* [untouchables] and women—are closer to reaching God because they are better prepared for the complete subjugation and devotion required from the *bhakta* [devotee].<sup>142</sup>

In her essay on Mirabai, Kumkum Sangari analyzes this inversion of subalternity and suggests that subjugation endows the devotee with power “Because submission is voluntary, and not merely a duty, social behaviours of enforced dependence are displaced and become the qualities of the believer” (Sangari 1472). By encoding the devotee's *bhakti* in a narrative of choice versus duty, subjugation is “voluntary” rather than compulsory, Sangari reads the act of devotion within the frame of the modern, which is characterized by “decisionism.”<sup>143</sup> In doing so, she elides the powerful affective registers that characterize the act of devotion. If seen through the framework of what Chakrabarty calls History 2<sup>144</sup> or affective history, the *bhakta*'s

---

<sup>140</sup> See Charabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, pp 62-71.

<sup>141</sup> As Thomas Hopkins suggests in his essay “The Social Teaching of the Bhagavata Purana,” which discusses *bhakti* among the *Vaishnavas* of Bengal: ““The purpose of *bhakti* is to destroy men's attachment to the world by shifting their affection and desire from the world to the Lord. As attachment and devotion to Bhagavan increase, attachment to the world decreases, and release from *samsara* is possible” (Hopkins 8).

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, p 43

<sup>144</sup> See Charabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, pp 62-71.

submission through the act of devotion is not an act made within the framework of choice and duty, but rather an act situated in the affective registers of faith, in which the devotee's ultimate joy lies in self-annihilation because in death she will be united with God.<sup>145</sup> Within this framework, the devotee's desire for subjugation is not a choice or a duty, but a powerful response to the affect of faith.

Read within the framework of Mirabai's philosophy of *bhakti*, the widow's subjugation is rendered into an act of faith, an enactment of her piety. Therefore it cannot be read only as acquiescence to patriarchal authority, but must be read as a necessary component of her salvation because it is only by subjugating herself to her Lord that the widow realizes herself. When placed within the framework of History 1 or the political framework through which the nation operates, the widow's desire for salvation through subjugation interrogates the biases that underlie the writing of the subcontinent's history, which follows the narrative trajectory of liberal humanist discourse in which agency is synonymous with resistance and therefore subjugation is charged negatively while resistance is charged positively.

Similarly, in Chapter 3, the protagonist of Premchand's *Sevasadan*, Suman, following the Gandhian philosophy of Satyagraha, embraces suffering and pain as necessary for her salvation. However, the narrative of Premchand's novel does not allow Suman to enter the fold of nationalist politics. I suggest that the widows' *satita* [devotion] and Suman's *seva* [service] never enter the political framework of the colonial nation-state because they are ultimately private acts. Following Sangari, I suggest that the devotion of these outcasts shifts from being a social practice regulated by Hindu caste society to a personal act of piety, which exceeds the social practice.<sup>146</sup>

---

<sup>145</sup> See Dimock, pp 47-49

<sup>146</sup> Sangari argues that in Mirabai's devotional politics "the domain of ethics, and of *paap-punya* [sins-virtues] (part of the karmic ledger of *maya*) shifts from obedience and transgression of law, and becomes fundamentally a matter of how a person stands with god—an 'internal' matter..." (Sangari 1473).

Therefore, in this frame the widow's *satita* and Suman's *seva* circumvent Hindu social practice by becoming matters that are "internal" to their own spiritual realization. In contrast, the devotion of the Hindu wife remains largely within the domain of social practice because even when it is an expression of an "internal matter," it is expressed within socially sanctioned forms of piety.<sup>147</sup> The nation cannot subsume the affective histories of the widow and the *tawaif* for its own narrative because these affective histories cannot be contained within the secular narrative of History 1.

I have purposively excluded Ruswa's Urdu novel *Umrao Jan Ada* set in the Lucknow of 1857 from this discussion because its historical context and devotional practices are entirely different.<sup>148</sup> I suggest that just as the *tawaif* Suman use suffering to forward her agency, Umrao Jan uses registers of pain from within her social, cultural and religious context to realize herself. As a Shiia Muslim and as a *tawaif*, Umrao Jan is trained to perform ritual mourning as a *zakira* in the *majlis* [religious gathering] convened on the occasion of Muharram, in which Shiia Muslims mourn the death of the Prophet's nephew Husain and his family at Karbala.<sup>149</sup>

As Akbar Hyder suggests, the *zakira* holds a special place within the *majlis* because he/she becomes the conduit through which devotees can experience the grief

---

<sup>147</sup> See Tanika Sarkar's discussion of Rashasundari Debi in "A Book of her Own, A Life of her Own: The Autobiography of a Nineteenth-Century Woman" in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*

<sup>148</sup> The Revolt of 1857 was an uprising by Indian soldiers in the employ of the East India Company against their employer. While it began with a few disgruntled soldiers who refused to tear off bullets with their teeth because they were reputed to be coated with pig and cow fat considered impure by both Hindus and Muslims, it soon snowballed into an armed insurrection against the East India Company. In the days that followed there was large scale massacre of both Indian and British civilians and the princely state of Awadh was destroyed in the process.

<sup>149</sup> The *majlis* employed *zakirs/zakiras* or professional storytellers who could move the audience to tears with their rendition of the events of Karbala. These performances usually entailed the rendition of a *marsiya* or devotional dirge composed explicitly to mourn the death of the family of Ali. The *marsiya* was usually narrated from the perspective of Zainab, Ali's sister, who was enslaved by Yazid's conquering forces. Both male *zakirs* and female *zakiras* needed to "learn the language of women and animals" (Hyder 38) to be effective *marsiya* reciters because the performance of *marsiya* required the *zakir/zakira* to embody multiple personas at the same time, so that he/she could effectively render the grief experienced by Ali's family.

of Karbala and thereby express their devotion.<sup>150</sup> Once again we are confronted by the politics of pain within the context of devotion. Asad argues that in the context of religious experiences, pain is productive for the subject because “in subjecting themselves [the participants of the *majlis*] to suffering (in some cases to self-inflicted wounds) they seek in part to extend themselves as subjects” (Asad 78). In the context of the novel, I suggest that Umrao Jan extends herself as a subject by transforming pain into performance both as a *zakira* through acts of ritual mourning and as a *tawaif* through the pathos filled registers of the *ghazal*.

The two spheres of ritual mourning and coquetry come together at the very end of the novel, when Umrao Jan’s chance encounter with her long-lost friend, Rampyari, becomes the occasion for an elegant elegy of her former life. Rampyari meets Umrao Jan at the *masjid* [mosque] where Umrao Jan has come to seek employment for the forthcoming *majlis* season and invites her for an informal tête-à-tête to her home, where Umrao Jan encounters her former lover the Nawab, who is now Rampyari’s husband. As discussed earlier, this then becomes the occasion for a poetry recitation in which Umrao Jan transforms the pain of losing a lover into a performance of unrequited love. Like the *marsiyah*, these couplets serve two functions: to mourn the loss of the past and to re-invoke the pain of the past within the frame of the present and in that sense to make anew the sense of loss. Within the framework of the novel mourning allows Umrao Jan to a discursive space which would otherwise be closed to her, and thus suffering becomes instrumental in forwarding the subject’s agency.

Given that the novel is situated within the historical context of 1857, one could read Umrao Jan’s lament for a lost love as a longing for a lost way of life.<sup>151</sup> I

---

<sup>150</sup> Thus, the events of Karbala are dislodged from their location in historical time and enter religious time, which is atemporal because through his/her recitation the *zakir/zakira* conveys the urgency of the event, its immediacy and in doing so the event becomes poignant and moves the audience to tears.

<sup>151</sup> Despite its setting in Awadh, one of the cities most affected by the events of the Revolt, neither the narrator nor Umrao Jan refers to the violence or horror of the Revolt.

suggest however that Umrao Jan's lament cannot be read as the nationalist celebration of 1857 as the First Indian War or Independence nor can it be read within the colonial lament for the world lost in the Revolt. This is because like the *marsiyah*, Umrao Jan's couplets celebrate loss and mourning, and in doing so disrupt the narrative trajectory of both imperialist and nationalist accounts of the Revolt. Once again, the gendered subaltern subject's imbrication in the sacred removes her from History 1.

In all the novels I have discussed so far, the sacred as a "knowledge form" works to produce the subaltern subject's condition of subalternity because it exists outside of the "will that produces the state" (Chakrabarty 34). I now turn to thinking about the sacred when it is intertwined with the production of the state, by which I mean not only the politics that give rise to the state, but also to the project of historiography, which self-consciously enables the task of producing an "imagined community."<sup>152</sup> I suggest that *Sacred Games'* use of the rhetoric of the Hindu right state confounds the secular rhetoric that underlies the writing of South Asian historiography, and that it offers an alternative narrative model for writing historiography.

Historian Gyan Pandey asks: "How do we structure or frame the histories that we write in order to allow some place for the bodies that carry the marks of these 'everyday' occurrences, and thereby often constitute the 'larger' events and processes of History? (Pandey 221). Pandey's critiques the narrative of history because it cannot capture the texture of the everyday, the ordinary. Literature on the other hand attempts to capture the nuances of the everyday through narrative form, and literary critics such as Linda Hutcheon<sup>153</sup> and historians such as Antoinette Burton<sup>154</sup> have suggested that

---

<sup>152</sup> See Benedict Anderson's discussion of the nation as an imagined community in *Imagined Communities*, 37-47.

<sup>153</sup> Linda Hutcheon suggests postmodernist historiographic metafiction can be an archive for history because it "refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that

the novel serves as an archive for history. Taking their analyses a step further, I suggest that the novel form offers alternative narrative forms for writing history.

While in my chapter on *Sacred Games*, I have discussed the intertwining of the sacred and the secular in terms of its aesthetics and politics, I focus now on the implications of this melding for the historiographic project. I read Swami Shukla's use of religious mythology to construct a history of the Hindu nation as an instance of a non-secular historiography. I am not suggesting here that Hindu mythology should be incorporated into narratives of the nation as the Hindu Right is wont to do, but rather that mythology as a narrative form eschews the linearity imposed upon the narrative form of history and also enables the inclusion of the fantastic, the everyday and the ordinary within it. In doing so, it textures the history of the nation to include within it those narratives that exceed formations of the secular.

In each of the instances described above, the presence of the sacred destabilizes the secular project of the nation. In the context of the contemporary postcolonial politics, secularism has come to be equated with peace, tolerance and above all democracy. On other hand, the sacred has become the catch-all episteme for any knowledge forms that live outside liberal humanism. However, as Asad suggests:

Secularism is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender and religion (Asad 5).

---

claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity" (Hutcheon 93).

<sup>154</sup> In her book, *Dwelling in the Archive*, historian Antoinette Burton theorizes the home as the forgotten, but legitimate, site of history. She refers to Urvashi Butalia's provocative argument that oral histories, reconstructed through memory, should rightly count as "history proper," (Pandey *Remembering Partition* 69) rather than as mere supplements to history, and extends this domain of "history proper" to also include memoirs, diaries and other genres of writing particular to women.

Through his rhetoric, Asad suggests that secularism has taken over the function of “religion” in the contemporary nation-state because it aims at political “transcendence,” and the promise of citizenship is indeed that it will wipe out differences of class, gender and religion. From this perspective the secular is not much different from the sacred.

Thus, I suggest that the sacred disrupts the project of secularism not because it is inherently different from the secular, but because it offers alternative modes of being through which the individual may define herself. Through my project, I have examined different modes of being offered by the sacred such as devotion and suffering, which allow the subject to transcend the historical exigencies of her life. I have also considered the narrative form of mythology associated with the sacred that offers a different mode of thinking through narratives of the nation. These inhabitations of the sacred bring under scrutiny the hegemony of liberal humanism in academic discourse.

## WORKS CITED

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Veiled sentiments : honor and poetry in a Bedouin society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *In theory: classes, nations, literatures*. London; New York: Verso, 1992.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London; New York: Verso, 2006.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Is the "Post" in "Postcolonial" the "Post" in "Postmodern?"" *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 420-444.
- Aravamudan, Srinivas. *Guru English: South Asian religion in a cosmopolitan language*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Arrojo, Rosemary. "Interpretation as possessive love: Hélène Cixous, Clarice Lispector and the ambivalence of fidelity." *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. New York: Routledge. 141-61.
- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Asaduddin, M. "First Urdu Novel: Contesting Claims and Disclaimers." *Annual of Urdu Studies* 16 (2001): 76-97.
- Bannerji, Himani. "Pygmalion Nation: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies and the "Resolution of the Women's Question"" *Of Property and Propriety: The Role*

- of *Gender and Class in Imperialism and Nationalism*. Ed. Himani Bannerji, Sharzad Mojab and Judith Whitehead. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. 34-84.
- Baden-Powell, Robert. *Scouting for boys: a handbook for instruction in good citizenship*. Ed. Elleke Boehmer. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Bhabha, Homi. "The World and the Home." *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 445-455.
- Bhatt, Chetan. *Hindu nationalism: origins, ideologies and modern myths*. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2001.
- Blaser, John and Stephanie L.M. Blaser. *Film Noir Studies*. 15 May 2008. 4 June 2009. <<http://www.filmnoirstudies.com>>
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Borthwick, Meredith. *The changing role of women in Bengal, 1849-1905*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, c1984.
- Burton, Antoinette. *Dwelling in the archive: women writing house, home, and history in late colonial India*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theater Journal* 49 (1988): 519-531.
- Carroll, Lucy. "Law, Custom and Statutory Social Reform: The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856." *Women and social reform in modern India: a reader*. Ed. Sumit Sarkar & Tanika Sarkar. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 78-

100.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Habitations of modernity: essays in the wake of subaltern studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

---. *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Chakravarti, Uma. "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past." *Recasting women: essays in Indian colonial history*. Ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989. 27-87.

Chandra, Vikram. *Sacred Games*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006.

---. "The Cult of Authenticity: India's cultural commissars worship "Indianness" instead of art." *The Boston Review*. February/March 2000. June 15 2007.  
<http://bostonreview.net/BR25.1/chandra.html>>

---. "Arty Goddesses 1." *The Hindu*. April 1 2001. June 15 2007.

<<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/04/01/stories/1301061q.htm>>

---. "Arty Goddesses 2." *The Hindu*. April 8 2001. June 15 2007.

<<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2001/04/08/stories/1308067d.htm>>

---. "A Welter Of Images And Thoughts And Questions." *Outlook India*. December 9 2009. 11 December 2009. <<http://outlookindia.com/article.aspx?239188>>

Chatterji, Bankim Chandra. *Anandamath or The sacred brotherhood*. Trans. Julius J. Lipner. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

---. *Krishnakanta's Will*. Trans. J.C. Ghosh, Norfolk: New Directions, 1962.

---. *The Poison Tree: A tale of Hindu life in Bengal*. Trans. Miriam S. Knight. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884.

---. *Renaissance and reaction in nineteenth century Bengal: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay: an English translation of the Bengali essay Samya*. Trans. M. K.

- Haldar. Columbia, Mo.: South Asia Books, 1977.
- . "The Confessions of a Young Bengal." *Bankim Rachanabali*. Vol. 3. Trans. Jogesh Chandra Bagal. Calcutta: Tuli-Kalam, 1986.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The nation and its fragments: colonial and postcolonial*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Chatterjee, Saratchandra. *Srikanta*. Trans. Aruna Chakravarti. New Delhi, India; New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1993.
- . *Charitraheen*. Trans. Benoy Lal Chatterjee. Bombay: Jaico Pub. House, 1962.
- . "Letter to Pramatha" *Sarat Rachanabali* 1. Calcutta: Deja Publishers, 2004. 38-39.
- . "Letter to Pramatha" *Sarat Rachanabali* 1. Calcutta: Deja Publishers, 2004. 79.
- . "Narir Mulya." *Sarat Rachanabali* 3. Calcutta: Deja Publishers, 2004. 947-978.
- Davis, Yuval Nira. *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage Publications, 1997.
- Denning, Michael. *Cover stories: narrative and ideology in the British spy thriller*. London; New York: Routledge & K. Paul, 1987.
- Devji, Faisal Fatehali. "Gender and the Politics of Space: The movement for women's reform, 1857-1900." *South Asia*. 14:1 (1991): 141-53.
- Devy, G.N. *Indian literary criticism: theory and interpretation*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2002.
- Dharwadker, Vinay. "A. K. Ramanujan's Theory and Practice of Translation." *Post-colonial Translation Theory and Practice*. Ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. London; New York: Routledge, 1999. 114-181.
- Didur, Jill. *Unsettling partition: literature, gender, memory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.
- Dimock, Edward. "Doctrine and Practice among Vaisnavas of Bengal" *Krishna*:

- myths, rites, and attitudes*. Ed. Milton Singer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968. 41-63.
- Engel, Dagmar. *Beyond Purdah?: Women in Bengal, 1890-1939*. London: SOAS Studies on South Asia, 1996.
- Faruqi, Shamsur Rahman. "A Stranger in the City: The Poetics of *Sabk-e Hindi*." *Annual of Urdu Studies* 19. (2004): 1-93.
- . "Conventions of love, Love of Conventions: Urdu Love Poetry in the Eighteenth Century." *Annual of Urdu Studies* 14. (1999): 3-32.
- . "The Poet in the Poem; or, Veiling the Utterance." *A Wilderness of Possibilities: Urdu Studies in Transnational Perspective*. Ed. by Kathryn Hansen and David Lelyveld. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005. 173-191
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny" [*Das Unheimliche*] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XVII*. Trans. James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press, 1955. 217-256.
- Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *An autobiography or The story of my experiments with truth*. Translated from the original in Gujarati by Mahadev Desai. Boston, Beacon Press: 1957.
- . *Hind Swaraj and other writings*. Ed. Anthony J. Parel. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Gopal, Madan Krishna. *Munshi Premchand: a literary biography*. Bombay; New York: Asia Publishing. House, 1964.
- Grewal, Inderpal. *Home and Harem: nation, gender, empire, and the cultures of travel*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Guha, Ranajit. "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" *Subaltern*

- Studies 1 (1982): 1-8.
- Hali, Altaf Husain. *Voices of silence: English translation of Khwaja Altaf Hussain Hali's Majalis un-nissa and Chup ki dad*. Trans. Gail Minault. Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1986.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom. *The saffron wave: democracy and Hindu nationalism in modern India*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Hein, Norvin. "Lila" *The Gods at play: Lila in South Asia*. Ed. Williams S. Sax. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. 13-20.
- Hopkins, Thomas J. "The Social Teaching of the *Bhagvata Purana*." *Krishna: myths, rites, and attitudes*. Ed. Milton Singer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968. 3-22.
- Hoodfar, Homa. "The Veil in their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women." *Resources for Feminist Research*, 22.3/4 (1994): 5-18.
- Hubel, Teresa. *Whose India?: The independence struggle in British and Indian fiction and history*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Huggan, Graham. *Territorial disputes: maps and mapping strategies in contemporary Canadian and Australian fiction*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1994.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A poetics of postmodernism: history, theory, fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Hyder, Syed Akbar. *Reliving Karbala: martyrdom in South Asian memory*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Jalal, Ayesha. *Self and sovereignty: individual and community in South Asian Islam*

- since 1850. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65–88.
- Jones, Kenneth W. *Socio-religious reform movements in British India*. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Joshi, Priya. *In another country: colonialism, culture, and the English novel in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Kaul, Suvir. "Kim, or How to be Young, Male, and British in Kipling's India" *Kim: authoritative text, backgrounds, criticism*. Ed. Zohreh T. Sullivan. New York: Norton, 2001. 426-436.
- Khan, Sir Syed. "Hindustan ki Auraton ki Halaat" [The Condition of the Women of Hindustan]. *Maqalat-i-sar-Sayad*. Ed. M. Ismail Panipati. Vol. 5. Lahore: 1962. 188-193.
- King, Christopher. *One language, two scripts: the Hindi movement in nineteenth century North India*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *Kim*. Ed. Edward W. Said. London: Penguin Books, 1989.
- Loomba, Ania. "Dead women tell no tales: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and Post-Colonial Writings on Window Immolation in India" *History Workshop Journal* (1993) 36.1: 209-227.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Mani, Lata. "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," *Recasting Women*. Ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, New Delhi, 1989. 88-126.
- Marx, Karl. "On Imperialism in India." *The Marx-Engels reader*. Ed. Robert C.

- Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978. 653-664.
- McClintock, Anne. "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race and Nationalism." *Dangerous Liaisons*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, Ella Shohat. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 89-112.
- Metcalf, Barbara Daly. *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*. Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Mee, Jon. "After Midnight: the Indian novel of the 80's and 90's." *Postcolonial Studies* 1.1 (1998): 127-141.
- Minault, Gail. *Secluded Scholars: Women's education and Muslim social reform in India*. Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- . "Other Voices, Other Rooms: The View from the Zenana." *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*. Ed. Nita Kumar. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. 1994. 108-124.
- Mohanty, Chandra. "Under Western Eyes." *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn 1988): 61-88.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Twice Born Fiction: themes and techniques of the Indian novel in English* New Delhi: Heinemann, 1971.
- . *Realism and Reality: The novel and society in India*. Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- . "Dealing with Anxieties." *The Hindu*. February 25 2001. June 16 2007.  
<<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2001/02/25/stories/1325067a.htm>>
- . *Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian writing in English*. New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Mukherjee, Sujit. *Translation as discovery and other essays on Indian literature in*

- English translation.* New Delhi: Allied, 1981.
- . *Translation as Recovery.* Ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2004.
- Naim, C.M. "The Earliest Extant Review of Umra'o Jan." *Annual of Urdu Studies* 15 (2000): 287-292.
- . "Transvestic Words? The Rekhti in Urdu." *Annual of Urdu Studies* 16 (2001): 3-26.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The intimate enemy: loss and recovery of self under colonialism.* Delhi: Oxford, 1983.
- Niranjana, Tejaswani. "Left to the Imagination: Indian Nationalisms and Female Sexuality in Trinidad" *Public Culture* 11.1 (1999): 223-243.
- Pandey, Gyanendra. *Remembering partition: violence, nationalism, and history in India.* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Parikh, Crystal. "The Most Outrageous Masquerade": Queering Asian-American Masculinity." *Modern Fiction Studies.* 48.4. (Winter 2002). 858-898.
- Petievich, Carla. "Rekhti: Impersonating the feminine in Urdu poetry." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies.* (2001): 75-90.
- Plotz, Judith. "Rushdie's Pickle and New Indian Historical Novel : Sealy, Singh, Tharoor and National Metaphor." *World Literature Written in English* 35.2. 28-48.
- Prabhakar, Vishnu. *Awara Messiah: A Biography of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee.* Trans. Jai Ratan. Delhi: D.K. Publishers Distributors, 1989.
- Pritchett, Francis. *Nets of Awareness: Urdu poetry and its Critics.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

- Premchanda, Munshi. *Sevasadan*. Allahabad: Saraswati Press, 1966.
- . *Sevasadan*. Trans. Snehal Shingavi. New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- . "Nari jaati ke adhikaar" [The Rights of Womankind] *Vividh Prasang* 3. Ed. Amrit Rai. Allahabad: Hansa Prakashana. 1962. 249-253.
- Rabasa, Jose. "Allegories of Atlas." *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin. London ; New York : Routledge, 2006. 358-364.
- Rao, Vidya. "Thumri as Feminine Voice." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, (April 28, 1990): 31-39.
- Ray, Sangeeta. *En-gendering India: woman and nation in colonial and postcolonial narratives*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Ruswa, Mohammed Hadi. *Umrao Jan Ada*. Lucknow: Munshi Gulab Singh Press, 1899.
- . *Umrao Jan Ada*. Trans. David Matthews. Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1996.
- . *Junun-e-Intezaar*. Lucknow: Munshi Gulab Singh Press, 1899.
- Reynolds, G.W.M. *Rosa Lambert*. London: John Dicks, 1854.
- Roy, Parama. "Kim, the Myth of Nation, and National Identity." *Kim: authoritative text, backgrounds, criticism*. Ed. Zohreh T. Sullivan. New York: Norton, 2001. 393-405.
- Said, Edward. Introduction. *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling. London: Penguin Books, 1989.
- . *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Sangari, Kumkum. "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of *Bhakti*." *Economic and Political Weekly*. July 7 (1990): 1464-75.

- Sarkar, Mahua. *Visible histories, disappearing women: producing Muslim womanhood in late colonial Bengal* Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu wife, Hindu nation, community, religion, and cultural nationalism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Sen, Samita. "Offences Against Marriage: Negotiating custom in colonial Bengal." A *question of silence: the sexual economies of modern India*. Ed. Janaki Nair & Mary E. John. London; New York: Zed Books, 2000. 77-110.
- Singh, Jyotsna. *Colonial narratives/cultural dialogues: "discoveries" of India in the language of colonialism*. London: New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Politics of Translation." *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. New York: Routledge, 2000. 397-416.
- . *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- . "Deconstructing Historiography" *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988. 3-34.
- . "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin. London ; New York : Routledge, 2006.
- Suleri, Sara. *The rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Broken Nest (Nashtanir)*. Trans. Mary M. Lago and Supriya Sen. Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1971.
- . *Chokher Bali*. Trans. Sreejata Guha, New Delhi: Penguin Global, 2005.
- . "Literary Creation." *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected writings on literature and language*. Ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri and Sankha Ghosh. New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

- . *The Home and the World*. Trans. Surendranath Tagore. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin; New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking Penguin, 1985.
- Thapar, Romila. *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Tharu, Susie. "The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body." *Gender and Caste: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*. Ed. Anupama Rao. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003. 261-275.
- The Free Dictionary*. January 2009. Farlex Inc. May 12 2009.  
<<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/translate>>
- Veer, Peter van der. *Imperial encounters: religion and modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Visweswaran, Kamala. "Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and Its Historiography." *Subaltern Studies* 9. Delhi: Oxford University Press, (1996): 83-125.
- Yegenoglu, Meyda. "Veiled Fantasies: Cultural and Sexual Difference in the Discourse of Orientalism." *Feminist postcolonial theory: a reader*. Ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003. 542-556.