

CONTEXTUAL UNIVERSALISMS: INDIGENOUS DISCOURSES OF HUMAN
RIGHTS AND MODERNITY IN INDIA AND SOUTH AFRICA

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Contextual Universalisms: Indigenous Discourses of Human Rights and Modernity in India and South Africa

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Contextual Universalisms investigates the “universal” ideas and values that define Enlightenment humanism-- such as secular rationality, individual freedom, and the capacity for democratic thought—and argues that these notions are also instantiated within colonized cultures relatively independently from European versions of these concepts, in context-specific forms. I explore marginalized articulations of these values, and the discourses of human rights they develop, through Indian and South African literatures.

I probe these indigenous manifestations of “universalisms,” or “modern” constructs through which cultures define humanity, by focusing on exemplary literary texts from the Global South that show how theoretical and philosophical notions of universal humanity and “human rights” have been developed. They reveal that these ideas are not colonial imports, or even products of the colonial encounter, and that they become self-evident through context-specific forms of local literary traditions. Furthermore, the subaltern authors of these texts reflect and produce a grassroots populism that defines itself through “indigenous” universalizing notions of rights. They create movements of popular resistance through distinct local and intellectual cultures and institutions very different from those used by colonialists or even by hegemonic nationalist groups in their own societies.

The recognition of “modern” humanist values in indigenous texts as both “contextual” and “universalizing” revises previous understandings of colonized societies as “pre-modern” and of modernity as a European import. Instead, these “contextual universalisms” testify that the discourse of European colonial modernity is not the only discourse of modernity through which to view the colonial past, thereby rethinking current ways of reading Anglophone Indian and South African texts. Indeed, these indigenous literatures redefine modernity as a descriptive word for any period of radical rupture and resistance against past orthodoxies, a way of questioning the present that insists on a radical humanism. In doing so, these texts destabilize widely accepted scholarly binaries between “tradition” and “modernity,” and the “religious” and the “secular,” suggesting that modern ideals may well have a more complex history than is often imagined.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mukti Lakhi was born in Belgium. Before beginning her Ph.D. in English at Cornell University, she obtained a BA in English and History from the University of York, UK, and an M.Phil. in Criticism and Culture from the University of Cambridge, UK.

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Preface

In ancient India, the saint poet Vyasa wrote an extensive mythological history called the *Mahabharata*, now considered one of the founding texts of Hinduism. In it, one of his principal characters stated that the supreme human being should be defined, regardless of their caste, according to their capacity for “truth, charity, forgiveness, good conduct, benevolence, kindness, observance of the rites of his order, and mercy.”¹ Centuries later, in pre-colonial South Africa, Zulu tribes measured the worth of a human according to their generosity and kindness towards others, proclaiming that “a person is a person through other people.”² And later still, in early twentieth century India, a young anti-colonial revolutionary called Mohandas Gandhi resisted the racist statements of his colonizers with the words: “gentleness, self-sacrifice and generosity are the exclusive possession of no one race or religion.”³

All these statements were uttered in very different times and places by singular personalities whose lives were defined completely independently of colonialism, or wholly through the lens of the colonial encounter. Nevertheless, what unifies them is a conviction that underlying the diversity of human experience it is possible to discern a rational, universal and given human nature possessing qualities such as “kindness,

¹ From the conversation between Yudhisthira and Naga Nahusha in Ved Vyasa, *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, trans. Kisari Mohan Ganguli (Calcutta: Bhārata Press, 1894), Book 3 of 18: Vana Parva.

² This is translated from the popular Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.

³ Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India* 10 (August 30th, 1928): 292.

generosity, freedom, and justice.” And, these diverse thinkers turned to this belief to fuel their popular movements of resistance against those who would deny them “human” status. These statements were all made towards the crafting of ethical social orders, whether to contest the ancient, feudal systems of caste in South Asia, to create communal systems of agriculture in pre-colonial South Africa, or anti-colonial movements against foreign oppressors in the colonized global South.

Ironically, in the post-colonial and globalized world, humanisms of any kind have been dismissed precisely because of these universalizing tendencies. Post-colonial critics such as Enrique Dussel have rightly pointed out that universalizing Enlightenment discourses of the human were used against colonized subjects; the European white male embodied the supreme “human” and classified oppressed natives as never quite attaining human status.⁴ Other scholars, including feminists such as Carol Quillen, have argued that modern universalisms are imperialist; since they arose out of Enlightenment Europe’s liberal humanist ideology, they are incapable of taking into account cultural differences when imposed on to non-Western contexts.⁵ Post-modernist thinkers such as Michel Foucault have in turn noted that because power is all encompassing, universalizing ideas of rights are always already implicated in hegemonic ideological systems and the power relations they generate, as Enlightenment humanist discourses were; even when

⁴ Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor and the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996).

⁵ Citing feminist theorists Marnia Lazreg, Rey Chow, and Uma Narayan as positive examples, Quillen suggests that in writing about “the human self” one must convey a self embedded in human relations and social structures. This means that one should “write about a part of the ‘non-West’ from a perspective that sees a historical connection between Western liberal humanism and European domination.” See Carol Quillen, “Feminist Theory, Justice and the Lure of the Human,” *Signs*, 21:1 (Fall, 2001), 100.

universalizing humanisms posit themselves as transcendent, they always vary according to the vested interests within which they are articulated.⁶

As I argue in my introduction, the dismissal of modern humanisms because of their supposedly inevitable implication in relations of colonial power ignores the presence of alternative non-imperialist humanisms of the kind outlined by Vyasa or pre-colonial Zulu tribes. Instead, due to an exclusive focus on nationalist humanisms such as Gandhi's, all non-Western modern universalizing constructions are assumed to be derivative discourses, products of the appropriation of hegemonic ideologies by the colonized.⁷ Such an assumption reduces non-Western histories solely to homogenized relations of colonial power, with colonial rule seen as bringing about a complete rupture from the past; local power relations originating from pre-colonial times, and regional movements of subaltern resistance against them, suffer a historiographical disappearance.⁸ The corollary is that modernity itself is seen as a Western import into colonized societies, a set of ideas and ways of life that must be appropriated by the

⁶ Foucault argues that modern humanist ideas have always already “been invented...as instruments of a certain political and economic power.” See Noam Chomsky, Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature*, (New York: New Press, 2006), 54.

⁷ See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: a derivative discourse?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986) for an example of a text that focuses on the ways that nationalist thinking based itself on colonial discourses even while it pretended to return to a pure indigenous past. While this is a fair critique of nationalist thought, I argue that the overwhelming focus on colonialist discourses has led to the overlooking of those indigenous thinkers that did not draw on them.

⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon see Sumit Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies” in *Reading Subaltern Studies*, ed. David Ludden, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002).

colonized and made their own through a creative cultural syncretism.⁹ This dissertation responds to these debates by highlighting the value of alternative indigenous universalisms to Indian and South African movements for social justice. I demonstrate how subaltern writers conceptualized modern universalisms independently of Enlightenment European influence, from within the cultural epistemes that permeated their consciousnesses, and harnessed them against the powerful groups in pre-colonial and colonial societies. Following Antonio Gramsci, I define “subalterns” as marginalized peoples who inhabit liminal spaces and who have little or no social, political, cultural, or geographic access to, or influence on, those who exercise hegemonic power.¹⁰

Drawing on these subaltern writings and oral literatures, I attempt to recuperate a critical humanism for the work of literary critics and philosophers, in the process pointing to ways of studying non-western colonized societies and cultures that are not implicated in colonialist knowledge systems. I do so by classifying marginalized universalizing philosophies as “contextual universalisms.” These were universalizing discourses that reflected shared understandings of values such as individual freedom, rationality, and democracy but were manifested differently according to historical and cultural specificities. They were universalizing because they posited transcendent concepts of the human that sought to include rather than exclude difference within the category of “humanity.” And they were contextual because they were rooted in local cultures and

⁹ Amitav Ghosh argues something similar to what I am asserting in reaction to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s theorization of alternative modernities along these lines in *Provincializing Europe*. Amitav Ghosh and Dipesh Chakrabarty, “A Correspondence on Provincializing Europe,” in *Radical History Review* 83, (Spring 2002).

¹⁰ Antonio Gramsci argues that subalterns suffer under the hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that is part of the “state.” The latter denies them participation in, and access to, the local history and culture of nation. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 52.

arose in response to local networks of power, not solely in relation to European colonialist hegemonic discourses that were imposed from above.

Along with “contextual universalisms,” this project explores another closely related theme, that of “indigenous modernities.” Any exploration of modernity must also consider its ideological underpinnings, or the universalizing manifestations of humanist concepts such as rationality, individual freedom, and democratic ideals with which Enlightenment philosophers buttressed their visions of new social orders. My assertion that these modern humanisms were also “contextual,” arising in non-Western locations independently of European influence, complicates the idea of modernity itself; “contextual universalisms” suggests that humanist modernities can no longer be seen as a Western import into pre-colonial societies, but as regional phenomena tied to local relations of power and resistance. I contend, then, that a set of radical humanisms, in context specific manifestations but nevertheless comparable to Enlightenment understandings of universalisms, were producing alternative modernities in pre-colonial and colonial India and South Africa.

Universalizing Humanisms

As I demonstrate in this dissertation, these “contextual universalisms” were universalizing because they outlined an inclusive category of the human that did not differentiate people according to social, religious, and racial specificities. Nineteenth century subaltern devotional poetry crafted a deliberately progressive category of the “human” in resistance to the discrimination that tribals and lower castes in colonial Orissa faced from entrenched caste systems. According to this humanist episteme, people

had to be valued based on their actions rather than their pre-ordained religious or social status. This devotional poetry thus legitimized all types of mindful labor over socially sanctioned hierarchies; even the previously “inhuman” low caste toilet cleaner and tribal laborer was just as human as the high caste, literate Brahmin valorized by the colonial and nationalist authorities. In South African praise poetry, the category of humanity was also galvanized to posit a radical universalism. Nineteenth century praise poets used communal performances to insist that “ a chief was a chief through other people” because “a person was a person through other people,” thereby maintaining a system of democratic universal participation in the political sphere. The defining of the self through recognizing the humanity of everyone else also extended to the creation of inclusive, communal agricultural economies and systems of property ownership. Finally, nineteenth century Indian feminist *bildungsromane* posited a universalizing conception of humanity that explicitly went beyond gender, race, skin color, or religion. Instead, a person was “human” simply by virtue of their physical presence and a capacity to register emotion. Unlike other humanisms that were universalizing only in name, these subaltern value systems and the movements of popular resistance they spawned were truly so; they were radical humanisms.

These alternative universalisms suggest that we take the universalizing potential of rights, the idea that they are universal *capacities*, - as opposed to any claim that they are always already universally valid - seriously. As Noam Chomsky puts it: “I think it would be a great shame to put aside entirely the somewhat more abstract and philosophical task of trying to draw the connections between a concept of human nature that gives full scope to freedom and dignity and creativity and other fundamental human

characteristics, and to relate that to some notion of social structure in which these properties could be realized and in which meaningful human life could take place....one can and must give the argument that the social revolution that you're trying to achieve is in the ends of justice, is in the ends of realizing fundamental human needs.”¹¹

Contextual Humanisms

The radical humanisms I analyze in Indian devotional poetry, South African praise poetry, and the Indian epic-bildungsroman were contextual because they reflected shared discursive understandings of core humanist concepts that nevertheless arose in culturally specific manifestations. In separating humanist concepts from the different ways they are manifested in instrumental relations, I contest post-structuralist assertions that universalizing notions, like any language, are inextricable from the ends they are put to. Instead, I argue that core humanist ideas are not intrinsically contaminated by power, although they may be put to imperialist ends. The indigenous literatures I examine therefore reflect shared understandings of core ideas like individual freedom, rationality, and democracy that differ in their specificities according to the instrumental relations within which they are conceptualized and articulated.

For instance, in Chapter Four, I demonstrate that there was a shared understanding of individual freedom in both 18th century Europe and pre-colonial India as the ability to act without constraint. However, in Kantian thought, the capacity for free action was based on a conscious will harnessed against the mystifying religious hierarchies of Kant's time, while in much indigenous Indian thought it was formulated in relation to the effects

¹¹ See Noam Chomsky, Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature*, (New York: New Press, 2006), 57.

of a will, that resided outside one's consciousness, on the physical body. Similarly, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two, the core idea of rationality in 19th century tribal India and Enlightenment Europe was the ability to distinguish magical, mythical ways of being in the world from those that were not. However, in secular Europe this rationality was instrumentalized solely through the mind, while in some Indian philosophical thought, such rational distinctions could be embodied in ritual. And, in Chapter Three, I demonstrate that Enlightenment philosophers and South-African Zulu tribes had shared but independently developed understandings of democracy as a political system in which subjects decided who ruled them, and how. However, while democratic decision-making in much of the West was understood as a majoritarian system, the Zulus continued debate until a consensus-based resolution was achieved; in the very different instrumental context of pre-colonial South Africa, the chief carried out a "democratic" decision making process by consulting with, and heeding, the opinions of other leaders and his subjects. These indigenous epistemes, then, clearly demonstrate shared understandings of core universalizing concepts such as individual freedom, rationality, and democracy even though they are contextually grounded in the terminologies and cultural specificities of different instrumental relations.

These universalisms were also contextual because they were grassroots responses to local relations of power, not imposed from above as Enlightenment humanisms were in the colonies. The indigenous universalisms I consider were cultural constructions just like European humanisms were but were subject to very different historical investments; they were harnessed against entrenched religious hierarchies and local dictatorships in peripheral areas where colonial power had not taken hold, as well as against nationalist

and colonialist groups in more central areas. Their birth in response to local power structures and cultural realities is most evident in the unique literary genres through which they were articulated. Indian devotional poetry, South African oral praise poetry, and the Indian epic-*bildungsroman* were precisely tailored to produce movements of popular resistance against the various oppressions their subaltern authors faced. Anti-caste Indian devotional poems, and anti-dictatorial South African praise poems generated collective action because they were easily memorized and chanted communally, by virtue of their rhyming patterns, alliteration, and uniform meters, quickly building crowds and adding to their movements' support. The epic-Indian *bildungsroman*, meanwhile, used the subcontinental, centuries old, *kavya*¹² genre of epic poetry to complicate the linear narrative of the *bildungsroman*, and appeal to indigenous structures of feeling familiar to subaltern psyches.

Indigenous Humanist Modernities

In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate how understanding these indigenous humanisms as “contextual universalisms” has implications for current understandings of modernity. I argue that these contextual universalisms problematize previous understandings of modernity as a colonial import into non-Western societies. They reveal that distinctly “modern” universalisms such as rationality, individual freedom and democratic ideals were arising in pre-colonial and colonized societies relatively

¹² Kavya refers to the Sanskrit literary style used by Indian court poets flourishing from the first half of the seventh century AD. This literary style is characterized by abundant usage of figures of speech, metaphors, similes, and hyperbole to create its emotional effects. The end result is a short lyrical work, court epic, narrative or dramatic work. "Kavya" can refer to the style or the completed body of literature. Asvaghosa (c. 80-150 AD), a philosopher and poet considered the father of Sanskrit drama, is attributed with first using the word.

independently from much Enlightenment thought, in forms usually denigrated as pre-modern and insignificant.

Charles Taylor has theorized modernity as consisting of a “moral order” constituted by ideas about ethical ways of being and systems of social organization. He argues that the project of modernization entailed the translation of this moral order into social imaginaries, or into the understandings, background practices, and common expectations that give people a sense of a shared group life. For the first time, politics began to create economic, public, and social spheres that were meant to work in the service of individuals’ rights. The new moral principle of a general equality among individuals spread to ever more areas of social life, transforming “the social imaginary,” the collective life of the people.¹³

I demonstrate that a moral order of modernity, which consisted of universalizing constructions of humanity in the West, also existed in the non-West at different geo-historical moments, relatively independently from Western humanisms. This alternative radical moral order in pre-colonial and colonized societies, grounded in indigenous forms of knowledge, makes a case for the presence of alternative modernities, or the development of indigenous public and economic spheres that also emphasized the collective good rather than powerful vested interests.

In the process of revealing these alternative modern social orders, the South African and Indian “contextual universalisms” I examine function not simply as aesthetic forms but philosophical modes that produced rational political and social action towards

¹³ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

the creation of “modern” societies. Thus they force readers to take seriously the epistemic categories posed by the milieus themselves. For instance, “religious” devotional poetry that theorizes rational social organization allows us to rethink previous scholarly divisions between philosophy and literature, “tradition” and “modernity” and the “religious” and “secular,” revealing modern, secular, and philosophical ideas occurring in texts usually considered traditional, religious folklore by Western knowledge systems.

A serious critical debate about the epistemic validity of universalizing humanisms requires clarity about what forms universalisms took in the Western as well as non-Western world, and about how these non-European universalisms conceptualized ideas of moral modern social orders from within their own cultural realities. In the process of outlining these alternative universalisms, I hope to develop a post-enlightenment, historically grounded, critical humanism for the work of scholars in the humanities. My notion of contextually universalist modernities also casts renewed light on the transitions that marked the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the colonization and decolonization of the non-Western world, the setting up of modern institutions such as democracy in these regions, and the kinds of essentialist identity categories used to describe non-Western peoples in the process; what alternative modern histories were subsumed to produce these colonialist narratives? How does one talk about the alternative humanisms that buttressed these alternative modernities without resorting to cultural or historical relativism? And how can the remnants of these alternative modernities inform debates about social justice today? The answers to these questions, I believe, can help us better realize the truly “modern” societies that human rights instruments seek, and too often fail, to produce.

Introduction

It was a frigid day in Ithaca, New York, in November 2008. I had been glued to the television screen in my small student apartment for hours, taking breaks only to watch the hordes of students who ran past my window every few minutes, shouting joyfully and waving the American flag. America had just elected its first black president. However, the unprecedented elation of that moment was reversed for me when, a few months later, I realized that not much had changed; listening to the radio, I heard an influential, conservative American radio host, political commentator, and opinion leader, Rush Limbaugh, assert that Obama was "more African in his roots than American" and that he was "behaving like an African colonial despot."² Limbaugh was drawing on a common colonial stereotype, that Africans were incapable of creating and maintaining fair and equal systems of political rule, and of sustaining the democracy that was one of the qualities of being truly "human." These kinds of prejudices confirm Africanist scholar Achille Mbembe's assertion that "Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of "human nature." Or, when it is, its things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality. It is this elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind."³ Limbaugh's

² "The Rush Limbaugh Show," Rush Limbaugh, accessed June 26 2009, <http://thinkprogress.org/2009/06/26/limbaugh-obama-colonial-despot/>.

³ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

assertion and Mbembe's commentary reminded me of the charges of oriental despotism with which colonial authorities in a very different time and place had stereotyped their Indian subjects, also denying them of "fully human" or "modern" status. Together, they renewed my interest in how African and Indian cultures had envisioned their own "humanity" before and during colonial rule, and dealt with the "inhuman" charges leveled against them.

It was with these unresolved questions in mind that I revisited Dipesh Chakrabarty's account of modernity in India, *Provincializing Europe*, a widely-cited work of "postcolonial studies," and came across the following passage: "modern social critiques of caste, oppressions of women, the lack of rights for laboring and subaltern classes in India, and so on – and, in fact, the very critique of colonialism itself" is "unthinkable except as a legacy, partially, of how Enlightenment Europe was appropriated in the subcontinent. The Indian constitution tellingly begins by repeating certain universal Enlightenment themes celebrated, say, in the American constitution. And it is salutary to remember that the writings of the most trenchant critic of the institution of 'untouchability' in British India refer us back to some originally European ideas about liberty and human equality."⁴ Were these assumptions about African despotism on one hand, and "liberty and human equality" being "originally" Euro-American ideas on the other, justified? How could I reconcile characterizations of African despotism with what I had been reading about pre-colonial Zulu democratic systems? How could I make sense

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4-5.

of Chakrabarty's claims about ideas of "liberty" and "human equality" being colonial imports in light of the pre-colonial movements for religious and social equality that I had come across on my annual visits to Rajasthan? What, for instance, of the medieval female saint, Mirabai, who used a vernacular language to harness a mass movement against the wealth, ignorance, self-interest and pride of the upper castes, temple hierarchies, and patriarchal social structures? These historical figures and events sounded to me just as "modern" as Enlightenment ideas about human equality. They did not, then, fit scholarly accounts of alternative modernities as colonial imports into "traditional" societies.

This dissertation concerns itself with precisely these fissures in current accounts of "modernity," with alternative, indigenous notions of that same phenomenon, as well as with the humanisms that buttressed these alternative modernities. Drawing in part on such scholars as Sanjay Subrahmanyam, V.Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Satya Mohanty, I redefine modernity as a descriptive word for any period of radical rupture and resistance against past orthodoxies.⁵ Furthermore, I add that such modernities are periods that question the present by insisting on radical humanist values. I do so by investigating the modern "universal" ideas and values that define Enlightenment humanism-- such as secular rationality, individual freedom, and the capacity for democratic thought —and argue that contextualized versions of these notions are also articulated by subalterns

⁵ I am following the example of other efforts in this vein such as V. Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's readings of South Indian folk epics, courtly poetry, and prose narratives to argue the existence of modern historical narrative in pre-colonial India. V. Narayana Rao, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, David Shulman, *Textures of Time*, (London: Other Press, 2003) I am also referring to Satya Mohanty's literary reading of the Oriya Lakshmi Purana for a theorization of a pre-colonial modernity containing both a feminist message and a radical message of caste equality. See Satya Mohanty, "Alternative Modernities and Medieval Indian Literature: the Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* As Radical Pedagogy," *Diacritics* 38.3 (Fall 2008): 3–21

within colonized cultures independently of Enlightenment epistemes. I thereby add to emerging discussions of “indigenous,” “alternative” modernities that aspire to “provincialize” European accounts of historical progress without resorting to cultural or historical relativism. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam, V. Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Satya P. Mohanty have argued,⁶ such indigenous texts reveal that these modern ideas are not colonial imports, or even necessarily products of the colonial encounter. This means that modernity, as Susan Stanford Friedman puts it, “need no longer reside solely in a specific set of institutional, ideological, or aesthetic characteristics emergent in the post-Renaissance West, radiating globally along the pathways of empire and postcoloniality, and appearing as pale copies of western genius. Instead, a particularized modernity located in space and time could potentially emerge wherever there was rapid change or a consciousness of newness.”⁷ Instead of starting with the question, “How were Enlightenment ideas appropriated in India to produce an alternative modernity that was just as Indian as it was European?” as Chakrabarty does, I therefore reverse the critical itinerary. Along with Subrahmanyam,⁸ I ask: “Where else might accelerated societal

⁶ See previous footnote.

⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman, “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism,” *Modernity/Modernism* 8.3 (September 2001): 503.

⁸ Sanjay Subrahmanyam writes that modernity is “historically a global and *conjunctural* phenomenon, not a virus that spreads from one place to another. It is located in a series of historical processes that brought hitherto relatively isolated societies into contact, and we must seek its roots in a set of diverse phenomena—the Mongol dream of world conquest, European voyages of exploration, activities of Indian textile traders in the diaspora.” Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400-1750,” *Daedalus* 127. 3 (1998): 99–100. See also the other essays in this volume: Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter (eds.), “Early Modernities.” The volume critiques the idea that the Western modernity was the only one, and the one through which other cultural modernities must be evaluated. See also a follow up special issue of the journal, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000). For another similar argument see Charles S. Maier, “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era,” *American Historical Review* 105,

change brought about by a combination of new technologies, knowledge revolutions, state formations, and expanding intercultural contacts contribute to radical questioning and dismantling of traditional ontologies, epistemologies, and institutional structures?”⁹ What were the indigenous humanist ideas that lay behind these alternative modernities? What power structures were they arising in response to? And how did they challenge and change colonialist epistemologies? The answers to these questions in many Indian and South African texts reveal that the humanist ideas that buttressed modernity were scattered, interactive, and multiple. They suggest that universalizing, “modern” ideals may have preceded the Enlightenment temporally and spatially, existing in various geo-historical locations, in context specific forms, or as “contextual universalisms.”

Alternative Indigenous Humanisms

I develop this suggestion by arguing that these alternative modernities are defined through “indigenous” universalizing notions of rights, grounded in distinct local and intellectual cultures, very different from those used by colonialists or even by hegemonic nationalist groups in their own societies. For instance, Bhīma’s radical devotional verse expressed its rational theory of social equality by drawing on centuries old literary and “religious” social currents such as tantric Nagarjuna Buddhism, articulated in the pre-medieval “intentional,” or “twilight language” (sandhya basha) of “upside down” expressions (ultra-bamsi). These indigenous cultures were very different from the rationalities imposed from above in the esoteric Sanskrit of the higher castes, or the

no. 3 (2000): 1–47.

⁹ Friedman, “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism,” 507.

scholarly scientific English of nationalist discourses. Similarly, Zulu poets drew on indigenous folk literatures, grounded in pre-colonial, communal traditions of oral storytelling, to produce widespread cultures of critique that endorsed democratic rule and challenged misuses of political power. Thus the proverb “a person is a person through other people,” was intimately linked to the lesser known saying “a chief is a chief through other people,” reflected in praise poetry as well as widely circulated folk tales about chiefs who were deemed inadequate to rule because they did not share crops, milk, and cattle – metaphors of power and resources -- with their subjects. And finally, Krupabai Sathianadhan’s idea of embodied agency, imagined as residing in the universal physical body, drew on universalizing, affective depictions of the natural world in the ancient, mythological *kavya* genre of indigenous literature to challenge the Christian valences of Enlightenment ideas, colonialist missionary narratives, and nationalist Hindu ideologies of individual freedom. In drawing on these indigenous cultural currents, these subaltern authors were differentiating hegemonic reformist ideologies that were imposed on them from above, from those that permeated their aesthetic epistemes and consciousnesses and were not.

I elaborate that these modern “contextual universalisms” in Indian (Oriya) devotional poetry, Zulu folk tales and praise poetry, and the Indian Bildungsroman in English, are instantiated through literary devices that reflect their universalizing humanist assertions of rationality, democratic ideals and individual freedom. The Indian mystical “upside down” language asserts its rationality by deliberately posing contradictions only to logically resolve them. Zulu praise poems testify that “a chief is a chief through other

people” through a democratic, repetitive multivocality that enacts the consensus based, rather than individualistic, decision-making process it propagates and supports. And the linear yet spiraling epic narrative of the Indian *Bildungsroman* posits conceptions of individual freedom by structurally undermining limiting colonial and nationalist assumptions about agentive action. The formal features of these literary expressions, then, are continuous with their social and philosophical messages, suggesting progressive ideas about the human condition that emerge from within indigenous traditions.

Producing Popular Resistance through Alternative Humanisms

Importantly, these subaltern authors employ specific literary devices to engender movements of popular resistance. Collectively chanted 19th century Oriya devotional poetry, for instance, engenders mass opposition to the idea that one’s fate is pre-determined through a blunt *bhakti* style that widened grassroots supports for a radical humanism by facilitating communal memorizing and chanting. In a similar way, the communal performance of Zulu praise poetry and folktales creates a sanctioned culture of democratic critique. Praise poems used repetition to create a democratic multivocality, emphasizing the mingling of different vocal registers to present a forceful unified criticism. These praises communally spoke a chief into being, commenting on his embodiment of defining character traits in response to the entire audience’s calls to “Speak Him!” The recital’s fast-paced elimination of downdrift intonation also created a seemingly never-ending text to which criticisms could be continually added by whoever wished to, creating customs of democratic evaluation by eternally holding the subject accountable for his actions. And the Indian “epic *bildungsroman*” points to the masses

left out by missionary and nationalist discourses of rights alike by choosing to tell her story in the popular literary mediums that even illiterate Indian women were familiar with; Sathianadhan disrupts the linear, Christianizing narrative of individual development in *bildungsromane* like Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, instead developing her character using long flashbacks and spiraling narrative reminiscent of popular Hindu epic storytelling. These literatures, then, demonstrate that ideas of the human as they are crystallized in literature do not exist separately from political arenas; "the political" is inclusive of moral, aesthetic, and ethical aspects of culture so that universal ideas of the human can offer modes of resistance to colonized subjects by enabling non-hegemonic re-articulations of universality. In doing so, these universalizing ideas serve as powerful tools for the historically marginalized, including women and religious, racial and class minorities.

To conclude, my project outlines a post-enlightenment idea of the "universal human" that does not conflate the core idea of the universal human with its misuses, and that is not limited by the parameters of Enlightenment conceptualizations of the "universal human." I investigate such a post-enlightenment "universal human" through Indian and South African texts that assert ideas of individual freedom, rationality, and democratic ideals as the qualities that make one properly 'human,' but do so from within indigenous contexts independently of European humanisms. They demonstrate that the transcendent capacities or potentials of the "universal human" can only be realized, or made self-evident, through context specific, cultural mediums. While the universal human is imagined as being transcendent or self evident, as existing outside culture and

instrumental relations, it can only come into existence in meaningful ways within specific cultural contexts. Joseph Slaughter makes this point to articulate what he considers the universal human's inability to transcend unequal power relations, stating that "although human rights are presupposed to be self evident, they must be publicly and officially articulated as such, named as self evident to be made self evident."¹⁰ According to Slaughter human rights discourses cannot be taken for granted as "self evident" because they are articulated as such through the very power relations and ideologies they purport to overcome. In contrast, I suggest that Slaughter's quote is a promising conceptualization for a different reason. Instead of demonstrating the inescapability of power, inadvertently, it allows for the making self-evident of multiple "contextual universalisms," or articulations of the "universal human" that arise in liminal, subaltern spaces not rooted in any imperialist tradition.

Colonialist Humanisms and Modernities in India and South Africa

Any critical engagement with humanisms must first grapple with its various critiques. Perhaps the most well known dismissals of humanism have come from leading critics within the humanities such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who have pointed out how universalizing humanist modernities have long been implicated in imperial civilizing missions.¹¹ I explore the role of the colonialist "universal human" in the remaking of

¹⁰ Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2007), 16.

¹¹ See for example Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi: Oxford, 1985) in which Spivak highlights the colonial aggression which accompanied the spread of Western humanism, and comments on the use of Western humanism as an alibi for the development of markets and the establishment of western democracy under

Indian and South African histories now. Through a critique of anti-humanist arguments, I then point out that the misuses of Enlightenment ideas of the human in these colonial contexts does not warrant the dismissal of universalizing humanisms altogether; to demonstrate this point, I highlight the presence of alternative, progressive “universal humans” in these regions before, during, and after colonialism.

What is the modern discursive figure of the “universal human” that underlies humanisms? The “universal human” is a symbolic person who, in the Kantian Enlightenment tradition, is an end within him/herself, born with “inalienable rights” by virtue of being inherently rational and freedom loving. The “universal human” is imagined as being outside culture and history, and was a central force through which “discourses of modernity,” the scientific, rational, universalizing ideas of the “human” that accompanied political and industrial modernization in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, acquired their power. These discourses were considered “colonialist” because they were often used to justify imperialism; they were implicated in constructing hierarchies of racial difference between Europeans and “inferior” others who supposedly needed civilizing. As Ania Loomba asserts, “the growth of modern Western knowledge systems and the history of most ‘disciplines’ can be seen to be embedded within and shaped by colonial discourses.” And because these discourses of modernity were “colonialist,” or, as Foucault would put it, disciplinary regimes of power,¹² “the central

imperial authority.

¹² Ania Loomba here draws on Michel Foucault’s claim in *Discipline and Punish* that “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowlegde, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.” This means that the discourses that shaped the modern bourgeois European individual were made up of disciplinary

figure of Western humanist and Enlightenment discourses, the humane, knowing subject of these regimes, now stands revealed as a white male colonialist.”¹³

Imperialist manifestations of the “universal human” were certainly evident in both South Africa and India; both had long colonial histories in which the “human” functioned as a colonizing tool, an ambivalent mode of resistance, a violent shaping force on indigenous epistemologies, and a central tool through which liberal-humanist narratives of modernity acquired their power. The “universal human” was appropriated by colonial discourses of modernity that sought to civilize the “savages,” and by nationalist discourses that sought to assert their own right to “universality” in their quest to remake themselves in line with European modernity. In doing so, nationalist groups completely redefined their cultures and histories because of the colonial judgment that they were not fully “human.”

Colonialist discourses of modernity in India, such as James Mill’s *History of British India*, often characterized India as pre-modern. Indians lacked “universal” human qualities; they were irrational and despotic. These Orientalist discourses therefore periodized Indian history as culminating in the “liberating” arrival of the British. This temporality was buttressed by the production of numerous studies of philosophy that pointedly excluded any intellectual, rational thought from the non-West. Histories of

power relations that molded bodies into agents of the state’s repressive functions. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, (New York: Vintage, 1995): 27

¹³ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 60.

Western philosophy invariably began with the Greeks and avoided the issue of African and Oriental influences on Greek philosophical ideas. The result is a sharp distinction, still alive in the academy today, between modern/philosophy/rational/the West, in other words the qualities of the “universal human,” and, pre-modern/mysticism/irrational/the non-West. In South Africa, the Dutch and British colonists created similar binaries in their characterization of Africans as less than human, a state of affairs that led anti-apartheid activist, Steve Biko, to point out that African cultures had been painted as irreconcilably Other and inhuman, with both colonists and nationalists producing “the thickest of volumes on some of the strangest subjects – even “the feeding habits of the Urban Africans.”¹⁴

Such characterizations changed Indian and South African religions and cultures dramatically. As Richard King has shown, the current categorization “Hinduism” is a construct of western scholars who, upon encountering Indian culture, created what they perceived as a more “human” religion along the lines of Christian conceptions of religion. Orientalist scholars sought out Indian equivalents of their own Christian culture (i.e. sacred texts and authority figures), and from these (largely the Vedas and the Brahmin caste, respectively) created the "religion" of the Hindus, or "Hinduism." Colonial authorities and the upper caste nationalist groups they buttressed classified other vibrant subcontinental religious and cultural traditions as “superstitious,” undeveloped forms of religiosity. In doing so, they abetted the colonial exploitation of Indians who did not fit

¹⁴ Steve Biko, “Some African Cultural Concepts” in *I Write What I Like*, (London: Heinemann, 1987), 40.

into the Christianized Hinduism.¹⁵ In a similar vein, Paul Landau argues that missionaries used Christian notions to highlight the “falsity” of African practices, reducing them to pale and faulty imitations of a Christian original.¹⁶

The result in both places was a nationalist attempt to reclaim a lost humanity by redefining themselves in light of colonialist cultures and by trying to parse out exactly how they were also human but different. In South Africa, apartheid rule triggered the Black Consciousness Movement, led by Steve Biko, which urged blacks to reclaim their “humanness.” Biko proclaimed to his black brothers that “man, you are okay as you are, begin to look upon yourself as a human being.”¹⁷ Part of the insight of the Black Consciousness Movement was, then, that black liberation could not only come from imagining and fighting for structural political changes, as older movements like the ANC did, but, as Dan Magaziner has argued, also from a psychological transformation in the minds of black people themselves, backed by theological arguments about individual self-worth.¹⁸ Ironically, however, such movements often also led to nativist and

¹⁵ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁶ Landau, Paul, “‘Religion’ and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model,” *Journal of Religious History*, 23, 1 (February 1999), 8-30. See also Leon De Kock, *Civilising Barbarians*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ The term Black Consciousness stems from American educator W. E. B. Du Bois's insistence that black people take pride in their blackness as an important step in their personal liberation. This line of thought was also reflected in the Pan Africanist, Marcus Garvey, as well as Harlem Renaissance philosopher Alain Locke and in the salons of the Nardal sisters in Paris. Biko's understanding of these thinkers was further shaped through the lens of postcolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Léopold Senghor, and Aimé Césaire who articulated a Black nativism called Negritude in response to colonialism. The aim of this global movement of black thinkers was to restore black consciousness and African consciousness, which they felt had been suppressed under colonialism.

¹⁸ Daniel Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010).

essentializing conceptions of Black selfhood. Biko emphasized that “a sincere attempt should be made at emphasizing the authentic cultural aspects of the African people by themselves...in essence even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the pure African culture in the present day African.”¹⁹ Ironically, the need to discover an “authentic” pre-colonial past that represented a “pure” African culture remained stuck in the very same essentializing colonialist categories that colonized groups strove to break free of.

A similar essentializing attempt at achieving “humanness” was made by Hindu nationalists in India. As I demonstrate in Chapter Two, in the late nineteenth century, the Hindu reform organization, the Brahmo Samaj, and thinkers such as Vivekananda, set out to challenge characterizations of India as pre-modern and lacking in “universal” values such as rationality and freedom through “an invention of tradition” that sought to highlight the inherent rational monism that was supposedly central to Hinduism. They also sought to contest colonial charges that Indian women were oppressed by Hindu tradition by asserting that women were the goddesses of their homes. These ideologies, while remaining entrapped in colonialist logic, also adversely affected women and lower caste and tribal groups who had to fit into them at any cost. As Janaki Nair points out, the result was that popular female worlds of culture which did not fit this frame of femininity and which had long been the location of a robust critique of patriarchy, as well as expressions of female desire, were sidelined.²⁰ For example, upper caste women’s

¹⁹ Biko, “Some African Cultural Concepts,” 40.

²⁰ Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India*, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), 149.

eroticism in song was attacked by the Bengali *bhadralok*, the upper caste middle class, who wished to minimize contact between their women and these.²¹ Partha Chatterjee thus suggests that “the new patriarchy which nationalist discourse set up as a hegemonic construct culturally distinguished itself not only from the West but also from the masses of its own people.”²²

Recuperating the Universal Human: Contesting Foucauldian Anti-Humanist Claims

While the universal human has been implicated in such colonialist paradigms, and while postcolonial critiques of these misuses have been insightful, I argue against the complete dismissal of humanisms by post-structuralist Foucauldian critics. The latter have insisted that universalizing discourses can never transcend the subjective, unequal relations between individuals and nations. One of the most recent variations of this argument has been Pheng Cheah’s *Inhuman Conditions* which argues that the humanities should “question” the idea of the universal human and even “give it up”²³ because the terms dignity, freedom and rationality which constitute the “human” change their meaning according to social, political and economic contexts and according to the people who have the power to realize them, people who are themselves products of the

²¹ Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalization of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal,” in *Recasting Women*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 127 – 179. See also her book, Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*, (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998).

²² Partha Chatterjee, “Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question,” in *Recasting Women*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 251.

²³ Pheng Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.

inequality engendered by power.²⁴ Demonstrating the arbitrariness of the meaning of the terms that make up the “human,” Cheah draws on Saussure to claim that language itself is “arbitrary.” “It is radically mutable for no reason at all.”²⁵ “The arbitrariness of its signs” renders it inhuman.²⁶ And since humans are constituted by language, Cheah argues that the human cannot be produced without the inhuman; the human is itself a product effect of the inhuman.²⁷

However, arguments that the “universal human” should be abandoned because the “arbitrariness of its signs” produces radical differences in its social use overlook the fact that all linguistic meanings, not just that of the “universal human,” change according to differing social contexts. Does that mean, then, that all language should be abandoned? Since the answer is obviously no, the real question that emerges is: does the term “human” *completely* cease to refer to any common or “universal” idea when socially contingent meanings are attached to it in varying ways and in different contexts? My analysis of indigenous literary texts shows that the universal human does have common referents in South African and Indian cultures. The imagining of universal human

²⁴ Cheah shows how Asian governments, Western powers and NGOs all subscribe to the notion of ‘dignity’ but all see very different outcomes as realizations of it, each discrediting the other by pointing out that the opponent’s vision of human rights is in fact contaminated by its particular site of emergence. However, while Cheah’s contestation that rights terms like ‘dignity’ and ‘freedom’ have no fixed meaning relies on the idea that different people all have varying understandings of ‘dignity’ according to their own positionality, the three examples of global actors that Cheah cites to support the emptiness of the term ‘dignity’ in fact do have a shared understanding of ‘dignity;’ all argue that their version is the most true to ‘dignity;’ ‘all are grounded in the Kantian notion of moral respect for dignity as an end in itself and something of absolute worth... as the supreme value that transcends all material interests or empirical inclinations.’ (158) Shared discourses, then, do amount to some level of shared meaning that gesture to an acceptance of what constitutes the ‘universal human.’ Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 157-158.

²⁵ Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 9.

²⁶ Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 9.

²⁷ Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 230.

capacities and potentials suggest shared understandings of concepts such as “individual freedom” and “dignity” even though their exact constituents and the terms used to express them may vary according to cultural contexts. For instance, as I mention in my preface, Zulu praise poets clearly think of democratic rule, similar to Western conceptions, as a system where power is shared between the governor and governed, and where subjects have a right to decide how they are ruled. However, Zulu praise poets envision democratic behavior as a consensus based system of decision making as opposed to the majoritarian ways of determining political outcomes in the West. Both are clearly “democratic” modes of government but differ in their contextual manifestations. As I argue, such a concept of “universal humanity” that manifests itself differently according to various historical and social contexts suggests exciting ways of reconceptualizing the field of Postcolonial Studies by recognizing certain Enlightenment, as well as non-European, universalizing humanisms as valuable instantiations of progressive modernities in their own right.

Recuperating the Universal Human: Going Beyond the Colonial Discourse Model in Postcolonial Studies

However, postcolonial scholarship has also dismissed universalizing indigenous humanisms on the grounds that colonial power was so totalizing that it was impossible to theorize colonized lives outside its framework. This “colonial discourse model” of analysis also draws on post-structuralist Foucauldian approaches that claim that all cultural texts can only be derived from the dominant colonial discourses, as the

nationalist discourses that arose in response to them were. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which the Orient is reduced to a linguistic discourse produced by the West, initiated, and is perhaps the most influential example of, this trend.

Following Said, much post-colonial theory has mainly concerned itself with the analysis of colonial discourse, particularly the ways it wholly shaped the resistance of, and relationships between, the colonized and the colonizers. Thus, Gayatri Spivak famously answers the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" negatively, claiming that the subaltern cannot speak because her attempts at resistance are always circumscribed by, and articulated within, discourses of power.²⁸ Homi Bhabha has also focused on the all-encompassing nature of colonial discourse, arguing that in the process of being "civilized" into the "universal humans" represented by their colonizers, the colonized appropriated colonial discourse to mimic their oppressors. In Bhabha's account, the colonized represent authorized versions of otherness, and "end up emerging as inappropriate colonial subjects...[who], by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer's presence," de-stabilize the discursive centrality and purity of colonial subjectivity.²⁹ This mimicry results in a hybridity that subverts the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures, contaminating the latter with the linguistic and racial differences of the native self. Resistance can thus be seen, in Bhabha's interpretation, as a

²⁸ As Spivak writes of an Indian female independence fighter who kills herself rather than undertake a political assassination, "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" because she is read "through the discourse of the male leaders and participants in the independence movement" or, by her female family members, "as a case of illicit love." The latter proves that "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse/Post-colonial Theory*, ed. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 104.

²⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 126.

counter-narrative that is produced from within colonialist discourses, a critique of the canon from within, rather than arising from pre-colonial cultural sources and realities.

Even critics such as Paroma Roy, who have extended the latter studies of the colonial condition, have still concerned themselves primarily with colonial subjectivities that were defined in relation to elite colonialist and nationalist power groups. For example, Roy examines a Muslim actress's emulation of a Hindu/Indian mother goddess alongside an Irishwoman's assumption of Hindu feminine celibacy to consider the ways in which questions of power, originality, and impersonation function, not just for the "western" or "westernized" subjects of Bhabha's analysis, but across a range of identities. In doing so, she demonstrates how examples of colonial mimicry cut across hierarchies of power in ways very different from the trajectories suggested by Bhabha.³⁰ Nevertheless, even Roy's approach examines the popular nationalist reinventions of Hindu "tradition" by those who had most access to colonial power, rather than the modes of resistance to power employed by vast swathes of marginalized humanity where these colonialist discourses had not taken hold. As Sumit Sarkar has argued, the approach has meant that the colonized "were virtually robbed of agency and held to have been capable of only 'derivative discourses.'"³¹

This is not to say that all post-colonialists have employed the singular "colonial discourse analysis" approach to the study of colonized societies. Theorists such as Anne

³⁰ Paroma Roy, *Indian traffic: identities in question in colonial and postcolonial India*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

³¹ See Sumit Sarkar, "The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies" in *Reading Subaltern Studies*, ed. David Ludden, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002).

McClintock have carried out a critique of the discipline from within, pointing out the variety of agencies represented by the colonized that did not stem from the discursive and physical presence of the colonizers. McClintock notes the inability of existing disciplinary frameworks to give these marginalized subjectivities critical attention; while postcolonial theory aims to pluralize histories so that the colonized have an epistemically just place within it, the field has too often ended up subsuming heterogeneous histories to the single, linear and Eurocentric narrative of global imperial expansion. Along with other post-colonial scholars, and scholars of alternative modernities,³² she argues that even the term “post-colonialism” confers on colonialism the status of universal history, while defining non-European cultures only in relation to that history.³³

Learning from Early Subaltern Studies

Subaltern historians such as Rosalind O’Hanlon, David Washbrook, Sumit Sarkar, and Ranajit Guha have also complained about how “Said’s views regarding the

³² For another critique of the term “post-colonial,” see Ella Shohat, “Notes on the Post-Colonial,” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 99-113. Shohat raises questions about the term’s ahistorical and universalizing deployments, and its potentially depoliticizing implications. Arif Dirlik’s well known critique of post-colonial studies also points out the discipline’s “excluding from its scope most of those who inhabit or hail from postcolonial societies. It does not account for the attractions of modernization and nationalism to vast numbers in Third World populations, let alone to those marginalized by national incorporation in the global economy.” See Arif Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura” in *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, ed. Supriya Nair, Gaurav Gajanan Desai, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 568.

Alternative modernities scholars (see footnote 8) have also made critiques of post-colonial studies’ epistemic centering of the Western world even as it seeks to do the opposite, and used these insights as a springboard to outline global modernities. This dissertation builds on their work. See also Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar “On Alternative Modernities” and Charles Taylor “Two Theories of Modernity” in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2001)

³³ Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term “Postcolonialism,”” *Social Text* 32/32 (1992): 84–98.

overwhelming nature of post-Enlightenment colonial power-knowledge” have ended up obscuring the complexity of pre-colonial cultures and societies. This historiography, “dominated by elitism – colonialist elitism and bourgeois- nationalist elitism,”³⁴ has had a negative effect on understandings of local power dynamics within pre-colonial societies and peripheral colonial territories; it has not been able to capture nuances in how power worked within the boundaries of the nation state, and the differences in how it percolated down to various colonized populations, areas, and cultures. As Sarkar elaborates “colonial cultural domination, stripped of all complexities and variations, faces an indigenous domain eroded of internal tensions and conflicts. The possibility of pre-colonial forms of domination, however modified, persisting through colonialism, helping to mediate colonial authority in vital ways, maybe even functioning autonomously at all times – for all of which there is ample evidence – is simply ignored.”³⁵ Sarkar suggests here that the singular study of the effects of colonial rule on Indian society distorts understandings of colonial power as bringing about an “absolute rupture;” when “the colonized subject is taken to have been literally constituted by colonialism alone,” power becomes abstracted, it appears to reside everywhere, maintaining complete control over everyone, and in the same ways.

³⁴ See Rosalind O’Hanlon, David Washbrook, “After Orientalism, Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34.1 (1992). See also Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies I* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982). Finally, see Sumit Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies” in *Reading Subaltern Studies*, ed. David Ludden, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002).

³⁵ Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies,” 407 – 408.

As a corrective, I follow the lead of earlier Subaltern Studies historians such as Gautam Bhadra³⁶ and David Hardiman, who, led by Ranajit Guha, outlined narratives of collective political action by low caste and adivasi subalterns that were autonomous from nationalist narratives of anti-colonial struggle and self-improvement. As Hardiman notes: “I write a history of the adivasis in which they are the subject...to understand the consciousness that informed and still informs political actions taken by the subaltern classes on their own, “independently of any elite initiative.”³⁷ Indeed, “the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population...formed an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter... There were vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people which were never integrated into their hegemony.”³⁸

However, my use of the early Subaltern Studies “history from below” approach is not a return to what critics often called the naïve positivist empiricism of early Subaltern Studies; it is not an attempt to go beneath the shell of colonialism to reveal a pure indigeneity inside, one that is its pre-colonial “essence.” My use of the word “indigenous” does not imply that there is such a thing as a pre-discursive pre-colonial past or subjectivity that can be redeemed. Instead, I contend that the discourse of European colonial modernity is not the only discourse of humanist modernity through which to view the colonial past. Rather, there were multiple discourses of modernity

³⁶ See Gautam Bhadra, “The Mentality of Subalternity: Kantanama or Rajdharna,” *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³⁷ See David Hardiman, “Origins and Transformations of the Devi” in *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 105-106.

³⁸ Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies I*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 4-6.

being harnessed by subaltern subjects through regional language literatures. I therefore begin not with colonial power, but with the analysis of how acolonial humanist discourses of modernity from below, which I call “indigenous,” were responding to the confluence of local and global power structures. As I demonstrate in my account of Orissan tribal theorizations of rational social equality in Chapter Two, this approach allows new insights into how subalterns and their humanist epistemes dealt with the challenge that these irreducibly complex, intersecting networks of power posed to their “humanity.”

In analyzing universalizing discourses of rights through the lens of localized domains of power and privilege, I also hope to add to an African scholarship on rights in the postcolony that attempts to go beyond the placing of universalizing rights and cultural realities as absolute binaries. Mahmood Mamdani, for instance, asks: “Can a culture of individual rights coexist with the right of every individual to practise one's culture?”³⁹ His edited collection of essays gauges the complexity of the question by examining the different ways that global rights discourses are implicated within local networks of control. I assert that a positive response to Mamdani’s introductory question is more likely if we also examine how localized rights discourses are harnessed in resistance to local and global power relations. In both South Africa and India, it was local rather than global rights discourses that provided alternatives to oppressive networks of power.

³⁹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Beyond Rights Talk & Culture Talk*, (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2000).

Reconfiguring Global Literary Studies

It is my hope that a fine-grained understanding of local networks of resistance to power can be achieved through careful readings of marginalized subaltern, folk, and oral literatures. As I demonstrate, these yield valuable insights into indigenous humanisms harnessed by subaltern movements of popular resistance. These marginalized responses to power construct a larger frame for literary studies that pays attention to previously overlooked pre-colonial and colonial vernacular texts alongside colonial regional language literatures and the Anglophone novel.

Literary critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee carried out the first step towards a diversification of postcolonial reading practices in suggesting that scholars needed to consider regional language novels within the colonized world, including elite nationalist works by writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, as products of local cultural and social conditions during the colonial period, and not simply derived from Western literary traditions.⁴⁰ Mukherjee thus paid attention to how regional novels reconciled the demands of Western realism with the representation of colonial realities in native societies, including colonial politics, religious and ideological tensions, and economic and social exploitations.

I take Mukherjee's groundbreaking attempts to level the epistemic playing field a step further by suggesting we do not just begin with analyses of elite regional language colonial texts. Doing only this, still results in skewed readings of colonial writing. This is

⁴⁰ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*, (New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1996).

evident in Krupabai Satthianadhan's English language *bildungsroman*, *Kamala*, which I analyze in Chapter Four; I demonstrate how framing Indian regional and Anglophone literatures primarily through the lens of the hegemonic groups present during the colonial encounter has led to their interpretation as reflections of colonialist value systems.

Kamala has been read by critics as nothing but an expression of the incomplete ways in which Western New Woman ideologies, and the nationalist ideologies that arose in reaction to them, were appropriated or resisted in India by Indian women. In other words, the "colonial discourse" lens of reading these texts has resulted in crucial blind-spots so that texts are interpreted solely through nationalist and colonialist binaries.

Instead, I suggest we start with the vast majority of subaltern pre-colonial literary forms, the vernacular oral literatures that were produced by the bottom echelons of colonized societies. I argue that these remained relatively untouched by colonialist influences, utilizing humanist ideas within literary traditions that had permeated the collective cultural consciousness of their regions for centuries, and which were also important literary influences on the "educated" writers of the Indian novel that had emerged in more central areas of the colonial encounter. Studying Anglophone texts such as *Kamala*, and regional language texts influenced by nationalist discourse, in conjunction with indigenous literary genres such as the *kavya*, demonstrates how the latter were also a crucial part of the period's intertextual universe.

Such readings demonstrate that colonialist power was not the only discourse at work at the time; there were multiple indigenous discourses articulating universalizing humanist ideas in 19th century India and South Africa. And these indigenous humanist

discourses were drawing on pre-colonial indigenous cultural currents as well as colonialist ones to mobilize against colonialist modernity, and produce their own universalizing assertions of modernity that were radically humanist.

The Chapters

My theoretical first chapter explores the idea of “contextual universalisms” as the theoretical thrust behind my outlining of alternative indigenous modernities. I argue against Pheng Cheah’s post-structuralist critiques of universalizing human rights discourses, claiming that misuses of the “universal human” do not render the core concepts themselves inherently suspect or theoretically unjustifiable. I elaborate that it is possible to empirically distinguish pre-colonial manifestations of ideas like the South African humanist ideal *ubuntu* from its abuses in instrumental relations. Therefore such humanisms, including concepts such as “individual freedom,” “democracy” and “rationality,” still remain constant regulative ideals through which people understand themselves and produce contextualized cultures of popular resistance.

This is evident in the 19th century verse of the subaltern “tribal” Indian “saint-poet,” Bhīma Bhoi. My second chapter, “Radical Religious Rationalities in Colonial Indian Poetry” reads Bhīma’s religious poetry to examine how a supposedly European construct like “rationality” arises in colonized contexts through distinct, local, and intellectual cultures. Bhīma’s devotional verse is radical in both form and content, expressing its rational theory of social equality in the centuries old “intentional,” or “twilight language” (*sandhya basha*) of “upside down” expressions (*ulta-bamsi*), and in a blunt *bhakti* style that widened grassroots supports for his ideas by facilitating communal

memorizing and chanting. This was very different from the esoteric Sanskrit of the higher castes, or the scholarly English of famous nationalist reformers like Bhīma's contemporary, Swami Vivekananda, who drew on Enlightenment discourses of science to bolster hegemonic colonial and Brahminical arguments about Hindu "rationality." Bhīma's local literary language, meanwhile, logically defines selfhood through one's actions and capabilities instead of through one's caste or gender, and also makes secular distinctions between myth and magic, and rational understandings of the world, in his tribal religious thought. Thus, Bhīma decolonizes the "secular" by highlighting the possibility of alternative non-Western secularisms, legitimizing subaltern intellectual legacies as 'modern' in their own right.

While my chapter on Oriyan devotional poetry charts how subaltern subjects disrupt colonial and nationalist narratives of Enlightenment reason through secular rationalities embedded in sacred narratives, my third chapter, "'A Chief is a Chief through Other People:' *Ubuntu* and Notions of Democracy in 19th Century Zulu Literature," shows that such "contextual universalisms" are only fully grasped through understanding the material conditions that spawn them. I argue that Zulu folk literature, grounded in agricultural metaphors about crops and cattle, produced widespread cultures of critique that endorsed democratic rule and challenged misuses of political power. *Ubuntu*, the Bantu word for humane-ness, in which "a person is a person through other people," was intimately linked to the lesser known saying "a chief is a chief through other people," in which a chief's rule was judged by how readily he shared crops, milk, and cattle – metaphors of power and resources -- with his subjects. Praise poetry and folk tales, therefore, comment on a chief's sustenance of his subjects through descriptions of

his eating habits, publicly monitoring the ruler who “overate” and “overflowed” with milk. Furthermore, these popular folk idioms, highly regarded as a form of history, deconstructed unethical political systems through specific literary forms. Praise poems used repetition to create a democratic multivocality, mingling different vocal registers to present a forceful unified criticism. These praises were forms of social control, with subjects communally speaking a chief into being as embodying defining character traits in response to the audience’s calls to “Speak Him!” The recital’s fast-paced elimination of downdrift intonation also created a seemingly never-ending text to which criticisms could be continually added, creating customs of democratic evaluation by eternally holding the subject accountable for his actions.

Chapter four, “Affective Agencies: Contextualizing Individual Freedom in the Colonial Indian *bildungsroman*” extends my analysis of how material conditions engender “contextual universalisms,” arguing that manifestations of “universal” ideas also depend on how an individual’s relationship to their material conditions is staged on the physical body. I read a 19th century colonial *bildungsroman* by Krupabai Sathianadhan, acclaimed as the “first Indian woman writing in English,” as positing a theorization of individual freedom grounded in an embodied agency. *Kamala: the Story of a Hindu Child Wife* bases this agency upon the universal capacity for affect, or feelings that precede the subject’s will and consciousness, unlike the ideological emotions propagated by nationalist and colonialist discourse, and register as bodily sensation. Affective agency “moves” the subject away from oppressive surroundings, enabling her to exceed the terms that constitute her. Sathianadhan therefore disrupts the linear, Christianizing narrative of individual development in *bildungsromane* like Charlotte

Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, instead developing her character using long flashbacks and spiraling narrative reminiscent of Hindu epics. By emphasizing the ways that the contextually grounded, universal physical body negotiates oppressions, this chapter points to ways beyond the culturally relativist vs. universalism binaries haunting comparative feminist methodologies.

Each of my chapters, then, is a thematic exploration of a “contextual universalism;” each explores universalizing discursive assertions of rationality, democratic ideals, and individual freedom, while demonstrating one way in which these universalizing discourses of rights were also “contextual.” My reading of Bhīma Bhoi's devotional poetry demonstrates that universalizing assertions of rationality were articulated through local, pre-colonial intellectual cultures; Bhīma was drawing on a literary language that had for centuries sustained the tribal and low caste peripheries of Orissa, itself an overlooked region bordering the colonial metropolis of Bengal. My reading of Zulu praise poetry demonstrates that humanisms such as democratic ideals were contextually grounded in, and produced through, very specific material conditions, such as the institutions of agriculture that stressed the communal sharing of crops and cattle between a chief and his people. Finally, Krupabai Sathianadhan's universalizing ideas of individual freedom contextualize themselves in the physical body. The subject's physical sensations interpret hegemonic nationalist and colonialist ideologies so that the body is “moved” to act against them through local structures of feeling.

Furthermore, each of my case studies tests out “contextual universalisms,” that are nevertheless articulated independently from colonial humanisms, in different

temporal contexts. The Zulu praise poetry I examine is an indigenous literary form from a pre-colonial society; while British and Dutch forces were making rapid incursions into Zulu territories in the early nineteenth century, government still lay in the hands of Zulu tribal chiefs. My focus on Bhīma Bhoi's devotional poetry, meanwhile, turns to the height of the colonial period in India to analyze indigenous, medieval humanisms as they are articulated in peripheral tribal regions both geographically and epistemologically removed from colonial metropolises. Finally, Satthianadhan's *bildungsromane* was also written at the height of the colonial period but in the centre of the colonial metropolis and in English. Unlike the other South African and Indian literatures I read, Satthianadhan's writing represents an internalization of colonial literary cultures and ideologies but nevertheless consciously tries to lay out humanist ideas independently of colonialist frameworks. In doing so, she demonstrates that Anglophone Indian texts cannot be understood independently of regional literary traditions such as the *kavya*, and that regional language texts had profound intertextual connections with Anglophone texts.

Finally, I make my argument about these alternative indigenous modernities by focusing each chapter on one structural or epistemological component that produced them. In doing so, I bring us back to Susan Stanford Friedman's question: "Where else might accelerated societal change brought about by a combination of new technologies, knowledge revolutions, state formations, and expanding intercultural contacts contribute to radical questioning and dismantling of traditional ontologies, epistemologies, and institutional structures?"⁴¹ My chapter on Bhīma Bhoi's devotional poetry analyzes just such a "knowledge revolution," the cultural structures of feeling and literary languages

⁴¹ Friedman, "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism," 507.

that emphasized the defining of individuals, in resistance to local and foreign power structures, through their actions rather than through their pre-ordained religious or caste status. My chapter on Zulu praise poetry looks at how “unmodern” ontologies were undone by, and modern literary epistemologies produced and supported by, “modern” institutional structures. I demonstrate how alternative humanist ideas, such as “a chief is a chief through other people,” in Zulu praise poetry were produced by a communal agricultural economy and an alternative democratic form of government. Finally, my last chapter focuses on the impact of “expanding intercultural contacts” in impeding, aiding, and altering indigenous modernities. Sathianadhan’s *bildungsroman* testifies to how these different visions of alternative modernities interact with each other and with colonial modernity, while holding their own in relation to it and even challenging it.

As I said earlier, this project grows out of the belief that universalizing humanisms, while historically implicated in colonialist regimes of power, cannot be reduced to their hegemonic misuses, and, therefore, are not intrinsically incompatible with emancipatory aims. Furthermore, I claim that modern humanist universalisms are not the product of a singular temporal and historical moment and that analyzing modern humanisms solely as Enlightenment imports into indigenous societies amounts to culturally relativist misreadings of pre-colonial worlds as pre-modern. Instead, I explore the ways that the humanist universalisms that define modernity were arising independently of Enlightenment ideals, in context-specific forms. Thus I highlight the indigenous cultural mediums through which subaltern poets and writers were launching their humanist challenges to colonialist hegemony. They propagated their ideas of rational social organization, individual freedom, and democratic ideals through

indigenous literary modes, including oral story-telling and ritual and ceremonial poetry gatherings, that amassed a populist base. In doing so, these poets and writers demonstrate the mutual imbrication of literary form, through texts that enact a multiplicity of voices for example, with their messages, which stressed universal rights and inclusiveness. These literary humanisms, or contextual universalisms, in traditional indigenous texts, developed alternative modernities in conceptual and institutional forms, thereby disturbing the binaries of tradition and modernity through which pre-colonial India and South Africa have been viewed.

Chapter 1: Theorizing Alternative Modernities Differently Through Contextual Universalisms

In this chapter I argue that, because indigenous knowledge systems have too often been evaluated and understood through Enlightenment categories of rationality, non-Western articulations of reason, and the expressions of individual freedom and democratic ideals they produced, have been suppressed and devalued. I ask: “How can we prevent non-Western subjects from being colonized by a universalized Enlightenment Reason while simultaneously acknowledging their own practices of rationality?” I answer this question through my outlines of “contextual universalisms,” or alternative discourses of non-colonialist modernity that arose in response to local, material power structures. In doing so, I respond to scholars such as Pheng Cheah who dismiss universalisms on the grounds that such stable constructions of humanity do not exist across cultural contexts, and unpolluted by the power dynamics of real world instrumental relations. Cheah therefore argues that it is impossible to separate any universalizing notions from the force fields of power in which they are articulated. I contend, however, that one *can* subtly differentiate expressions of core humanist discourses from colonialist manifestations of the same humanisms. For instance, I empirically evaluate how central humanist notions were expressed, as was the South African humanist ideal, *ubuntu*, very differently from the colonized, globalized versions they became in post-colonial contexts. Finally, I outline how the existence and trace-ability of these non-Western, non-colonialist discourses testify that humanisms can be both universalizing yet sensitive to contextual differences. In the process, these humanisms contest dismissals of universalisms such as

individual freedom on the grounds that the latter lack correlates in other cultures, and are necessarily imperialist when transported to other cultural contexts.

Modern Indigenous Rationalities as Responses to Local Realities

In order to prevent non-Western subjects from being colonized by a universalized Enlightenment Reason, I identify the core idea of rationality as the ability to think critically that is the legacy of human beings in general. This foundational capacity for rational thought, as Charles Taylor and Harry Frankfurt have elaborated, consists of, among other things, the ability to be logically consistent, to separate oneself from one's immediate context in order to evaluate one's life and one's desires in terms of larger ideas about the world, and the ability to trace one's own cognitive thought patterns.⁴² I maintain that this minimal rationality is manifested differently in varied cultural contexts, and that Enlightenment rationality was just one of its expressions, the result of a particular movement emerging from the specific historical and spatial location of eighteenth century Europe, and associated with key historical figures such as Voltaire and Rousseau. I argue that the lack of distinction between a core concept of rationality and its particular, culturally specific manifestations has perpetuated the universalization of Enlightenment reason as the only assertion of rationality, so that non-Western peoples who do not share the legacy of Enlightenment rationality are deemed irrational. This is

⁴² Charles Taylor, "Rationality," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, vol. 2 of *Philosophical Papers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971).

evident, for instance, in Dipesh Chakrabarty and Paul Gilroy's arguments about modernity.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* both concern themselves with colonial manifestations of rational thought. Chakrabarty seeks to "provincialize Europe" by "finding a home for Enlightenment rationality in histories of Bengali belonging."⁴³ On the contrary, Gilroy distinguishes between Enlightenment reason and reason as a universal capacity, analyzing slave narratives as explicitly rejecting categories of Western Reason to unearth a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once, a black Atlantic culture whose themes and techniques transcend ethnicity and nationality to produce something new. In both cases, however, the colonized use of reason is conflated with their having appropriated Enlightenment rationalities, and any superstitious behavior is seen as a rejection of Western Rationality and implicated in a disavowal of the very ability of the colonized to think in a logical manner.

Provincializing Europe is an argument about the mythical figure of Europe that is often taken to be the original site of the modern in many histories of capitalist transition in non-Western countries. This imaginary Europe, Chakrabarty argues, is built right into the social sciences so that, as in Hegel, it emerges as the culmination of teleology of modernity. Measured against such mythical standards, capitalist transition in the third world seems either incomplete or lacking. Chakrabarty's corrective is finding the

⁴³ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 22.

different ways European thought manifests itself in non-Western countries and therefore “finding the diverse ways of being” modern in the world.⁴⁴ As he puts it, then, *Provincializing Europe* is not a project of shunning European thought. “It is a project of globalizing such thought by exploring how it may be renewed both for and from the margins.”⁴⁵

Thus Chakrabarty writes about the predominant influence of European thoughts and ideals in shaping the socio-political systems in India and its neighboring countries, attempting to portray the integration of non-western minds with western ideals and philosophy. In this process of trying to find “diverse ways of ‘being-in-the-world,’”⁴⁶ however, Chakrabarty suggests that India became modern solely through Western thought, specifically Enlightenment thought with its rationalism, individualism and “liberty, equality and fraternity.” In his argument, the categories making up modernity, such as rationalism, become attributed to the West; India is pre-modern and therefore not rational except for the times when it syncretizes Western modernity’s ways of being rational. This is most apparent in Chakrabarty’s slippages between reason as a critical faculty that may be asserted in indigenous contexts independently of European influence, and rationality as a project that originated out of a particularly European historical and spatial moment. At one point he rightly seems to distinguish between the two:

The project of provincializing Europe cannot originate from the stance that the reason/science/universals that

⁴⁴ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 21.

⁴⁵ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, back cover.

⁴⁶ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 21.

help define Europe as the modern are simply ‘culture-specific’ and therefore only belong to the European cultures. For the point is not that Enlightenment rationalism is always unreasonable in itself, but rather a matter of documenting how – through what historical process – its ‘reason’ which was not always self evident to everyone, has been made to look obvious far beyond the ground where it originated.⁴⁷

In this account, Chakrabarty suggests that reason and science are universal and not culture specific. Enlightenment rationalism, meanwhile, has a ‘reason’ not always self evident to the rest of the world but has been held as the fulfillment of a teleology of modernity so that it made itself seem the primary subject of everyone’s histories.

However, in his analysis of Bengali history, Chakrabarty goes on to universalize Enlightenment reason: “I seek to find a home for post-enlightenment rationalism in the histories of Bengali belonging that I narrate.”⁴⁸ This does not simply mean examining the ways that European thought was taken up in Bengal; Chakrabarty goes on to attribute

modern social critiques of caste, oppressions of women, the lack of rights for laboring and subaltern classes in India, and so on – and, in fact, the very critique of colonialism itself” as ‘unthinkable except as a legacy, partially, of how Enlightenment Europe was appropriated in the subcontinent. The Indian constitution tellingly begins by repeating certain universal Enlightenment themes celebrated, say, in the American constitution. And it is salutary to remember that the writings of the most trenchant critic of the institution of “untouchability” in British India refer us

⁴⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 43.

⁴⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 22.

back to some originally European ideas about liberty and human equality.⁴⁹

In the passage, Chakrabarty scripts concepts such as liberty and human equality as ‘originally’ European, attributing Indian conceptions of these ideals to what the colonized have learnt from Europe. However, as I argue, ideas which constituted the Enlightenment itself were at least asserted in different manifestations by other cultures at the same time, or even before the West was experiencing them. As Martin Bernal points out, an entity called the European intellectual tradition, uniquely stretching back to the ancient Greeks, is a fabrication of relatively recent European history.⁵⁰ For instance, the Arab world too had a humanistic conceptualization of science and philosophy based in logic. In seeking to provincialize Europe primarily by analyzing the ways that European thought is appropriated by colonized subjects, then, theorists of alternative modernities often approach the histories of colonial and post-colonial cultures through alienating epistemic lenses, so that rational action carried out by a non-Western subject is often seen to be a corollary of the Enlightenment, rather than a fulfillment of indigenous assertions of rationality in response to local cultures and power relations. This is apparent in Paul Gilroy’s theorizations of modernity.

Paul Gilroy seeks to provincialize Europe by redefining modernity as a hybrid, syncretic form in which non-Western and Western forms of reason co-exist. He also argues against the translation of European rationalities into “absolute, universal standards

⁴⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 4-5.

⁵⁰ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena, The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization (The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985, Volume 1)*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

of human achievement, norms, aspirations.” Unlike Chakrabarty, therefore, he does not define his project by seeking to “find a home for post-enlightenment rationalism”⁵¹ in other cultural histories. However, even as he insists we must not do so, Gilroy, like Chakrabarty, reads colonized lives largely through the categories of Enlightenment rationality. Thus he ends up claiming that slave communities in the “Black Atlantic” reasserted their irrational African selfhood as a weapon to counter racist Enlightenment rationalities. The corollary is that these slave communities emerge as incapable of exercising their own brand of “rationality in being” in their everyday lives. Take for example, Gilroy’s discussion of a slave Margaret, who chooses to murder her daughter rather than have her enter into sexual abuse and slavery. Gilroy argues that Margaret acts “irrationally” here to gain the “upper hand over the pursuit of modernity by rational means.”⁵²

“It is important to note here that a new discursive economy emerges with the refusal to subordinate the particularity of the slave experience to the totalizing power of universal reason held exclusively by white hands, pens or publishing houses.”⁵³

Thus Margaret’s desperate act of trying to protect her child from a fate she considered worse than death, an act that clearly has a rationality of its own, becomes essentialized as typical of a black spirituality that Gilroy assumes counters the Hegelian slave’s logic of preferring bondage over death:

⁵¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 22.

⁵² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 68.

⁵³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 69.

“The repeated choice of death rather than bondage articulates a principle of negativity that is opposed to the formal logic and rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking and expressed in the Hegelian slave’s preference for bondage rather than death.”⁵⁴

Gilroy’s argument, then, rests on an assumption that western thinking alone has a preference for bondage rather than death. It homogenizes and places into binary opposition Western/life choosing/rational against non-Western/death choosing /irrational. This is apparent in Gilroy’s discussion of a black slave’s ‘bitter trial of strength’ against his master. Gilroy argues that Frederick Douglass’s narrative is proof that Douglass is no longer solely possessed of a “pre-rational, spiritual mode of African thought.” Now he possesses “his own compound outlook – an uneasy hybrid of the sacred and secular, the African and the American, formed out of the debilitating experience of slavery and tailored to the requirements of abolitionisms.”⁵⁵ By essentializing African thought as “pre-rational,” and American as rational, Gilroy thus implicitly rejects Douglass’s thinking as a form of rationality in its own right. The corollary is that, as in Chakrabarty, any trace of rationality shown by the slaves in their resistance becomes attributed to the appropriation of an Enlightenment rationality.

Contrary to Gilroy’s reading of Douglass’s narrative, I read Douglass as protesting the fact that slaves were refused their own, universalizing legacies of rational thinking. Thus the very first sentences with which he begins his autobiography complain

⁵⁴ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 68.

⁵⁵ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 61.

that he is refused knowledge of his own age: “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it.”⁵⁶ This is particularly significant when one considers that historical assertions of rationality have often been judged by the ability to comprehend and record the passing of time.⁵⁷ Thus Douglass’s writing continually notes that his lack of knowledge about his age results from “the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant”⁵⁸ and not because of an inability to think rationally; he shows that slaves can tell the passing of time by remarking that when asked when their birthday is, they respond with allusions to “planting-time, harvest- time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time.” A similar sentiment is repeated at the end of the paragraph: “the nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty- eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.”⁵⁹ While this sentence makes an explicit protest against being denied the information needed for him to be able to exercise rationality, it is also a humanist assertion of rationality on his part. Implicit throughout, is his belief in the equality of black people and his own right to exercise rationality: “The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege.” Such a “want of information concerning my own age was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, (Dover: Dover Thrift Editions, 1995), 1.

⁵⁷ See previous note.

⁵⁸ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1.

⁵⁹ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1.

⁶⁰ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1.

Chakrabarty in his discussion of Indian scientists, and Gilroy in his analysis of slave narratives, take the actions of particular non-Western subjects and essentialize them as products of supposedly homogenous Western or non-Western cultures, rather than framing their actions as responses to actual, material circumstances guided by context-specific manifestations of reason. My analysis of Bhīma Bhoi's assertions of rationality in Chapter Two suggests alternative genealogies of rationality, articulated by marginalized tribal subjects, who were reacting to colonial as well as local power structures.

Tracing Modern, Indigenous Democratic Ideals

I suggest, then, that we approach these pre-colonial universalisms from an empirical perspective, asking not simply how European universalisms were being appropriated by colonized subjects but what contextual, material circumstances were producing these alternative “modern” discourses of humanity. Analyzing these universalisms as responses to local realities, and not inevitably appropriations of Enlightenment universalisms, allows one to evaluate how pre-colonial humanist concepts, such as the South African humanist ideal, *ubuntu*, differed from the globalized versions, implicated in hegemonic discourses of power, that they became in later stages of colonialism. This is not to say that pre-colonial humanisms existed in some pure, pre-discursive space of idealism, but just to stress the importance of capturing the complexity of indigenous societies by differentiating hegemonic, globalized discourses of power

from pre-colonial, localized discourses that subaltern discourses of resistance were also reacting against.

My hope is that such an empirical genealogy of indigenous humanist concepts will complicate the Foucauldian assumption that colonialist modernity was so all-pervasive that a non-colonial past cannot be traced outside of it. I maintain that this latter argument mistakenly assumes that core humanist concepts cannot be discerned independently of the unequal instrumental relations within which they are articulated. I therefore resist the doing away of universal signifiers like the “human” completely; instead, I argue, first, for an in depth analysis of the ways that instrumental nationalist and capitalist discourses manipulate this universal signifier for their own ends and second, for a historical grounding of alternative non-colonialist manifestations of the core concept through an understanding of the latter’s linguistic, literary and cultural contexts. As I demonstrate in Chapter Three, the humanist ideology that is called *ubuntu* in post-colonial South Africa existed and buttressed particular Zulu democratic behaviors in the nineteenth century. In the process, I demonstrate how it is possible to trace *ubuntu* as something other than a post-colonial invention born solely of the colonial encounter.

Ubuntu in Instrumental Relations

Ubuntu appears repeatedly in contemporary discourses as an “invention of tradition,” on television, radio, official messages and in the speeches of leading political and religious personalities, including Nelson Mandela and archbishop Desmond Tutu, as

a traditional African quality to aspire to and embody. A Bantu language word, it serves as the spiritual foundation of many African societies. It is a unifying vision or worldview enshrined in the Zulu maxims *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, i.e. “a person is a person through other persons”⁶¹ and *Bonk’abantu bayadingana*, “everyone needs other people,” which are part of a long Zulu cultural tradition that emphasizes interdependence. These proverbs define the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others so that “both the self and others find themselves in a whole wherein they are already related.”⁶²

Ubuntu has been much critiqued for being too generalized and not historically grounded enough, for essentializing and homogenizing South African culture, and as reinstating traditional tribal hierarchies.⁶³ While *ubuntu* has been used productively by nationalist discourses of racial reconciliation such as those explored in Antjie Krog’s novel about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Country of my Skull*, they have also diluted the concept of much of its specificity and contextual relevance. Even more problematically, these generalizations of *ubuntu* as a “traditional” African concept that signifies humanity has turned the notion into a commodity that veils the alienating oppressions of the global economy (particularly noticeably during the 2010 FIFA world cup).

⁶¹ Augustine Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*, (Rondebosch, South Africa: UCT Press, 1993), 46.

⁶² John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 104.

⁶³ There have been various critiques of the popular notion of *ubuntu*. For instance, Yvonne Mokgoro, in “Ubuntu and the law in South Africa,” argues that African morality cannot be codified in the way that *ubuntu* attempts to do and is to be known merely on a “know it when I see it” basis. Mamphela Ramphele, in “Can *ubuntu* provide a model for citizenship education in African democracies?” argues that there is nothing about African morality that significantly differs from Western morality so the concept of *ubuntu* as an African concept of morality is nativist.

This marriage of *ubuntu* with South African's discourse of racial reconciliation is perhaps best reflected in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, a fictional yet journalistic memoir interested in *Ubuntu's* role within the TRC interprets the discourse almost completely through the lens of racial reconciliation. Krog draws on contemporary South African thinkers such as Jabu Sindane and Willie van der Merwe to declare that we should encounter the difference of people's humanness so as to inform and enrich our own.⁶⁴ Thus understood, the Zulu "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" translates as: "To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form."⁶⁵ The respect for the particularities of the beliefs and practices of others is especially emphasized by a striking, yet lesser-known translation of umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu: "A human being is a human being through (the otherness of) other human beings."⁶⁶ For post-apartheid South Africans of all colors and cultures, *Ubuntu* dictates that, if we want to be human, we need to recognize the genuine otherness of our fellow citizens. Since, the individual or self cannot be conceived without thereby necessarily conceiving the other, diversity is essential to community. When diversity is not respected as in apartheid, two hostile worlds are created instead of one. Krog describes her experiences of these separated worlds: "I'm visiting a friend in town. In their backyard lives a maid. 'Doesn't she miss her children?' I ask. "Maids don't feel like other people about their children.

⁶⁴ Jabu Sindane, *Ubuntu and Nation Building*, (Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 1994), 8-9.

⁶⁵ Willie Van der Merwe, "Philosophy and the multi-cultural context of (post)apartheid South Africa," *Ethical perspectives* 3:2, (1996), 1.

⁶⁶ Van der Merwe, "Philosophy and the multi-cultural context of (post)apartheid South Africa," 1.

They like to be rid of them.” On a previous visit “Why doesn’t she have a heater?” “Maids don’t get cold like white people. The reason she stinks – they don’t like washing.” She calls these assumptions a “series of comforting delusions” that allow people to accommodate two worlds. Instead, this discourse of *ubuntu* recognizes the common humanity of everyone so that differences simply serve as interesting features from which everyone can learn, with which community can be enriched. Thus Krog tries to describe a space which recognizes all South Africans as part of the same national community regardless of their race:

“God. Does he hear us? Does he know what our hearts are yearning for? That we all just want to be human – some with some colour, some with less, but all with air and sun. And I wade into song – in a language that is not mine, in a tongue I do not know. It is fragrant inside the song, and among the keynotes of sorrow and suffering, there are soft silences where we who belong to this landscape, all of us, can come to rest. Sometimes the times we live in overflow with light.”⁶⁷

Krog expresses the common humanity of South Africans by referring to the absolutes they all hold in common: “all with air and sun.” Although she learns about her country “in a language that is not mine, in a tongue I do not know,” “it is fragrant inside the song” because there is a space outside language which belongs to all of them, and it is in these “soft silences where we who belong to this landscape, all of us, can come to rest.” The emphasis on “all of us” through its separation from the rest of the sentence by commas enforces the universality of people’s rights as South Africans. This is obviously an

⁶⁷ Antjie Krog, *Country of my Skull*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 285.

overwhelmingly positive experience, described as “overflowing with light.” Krog turns a community out of different people, all South Africans, all humans.

While this discourse of *ubuntu* has done valuable work towards reconciliation in the post-apartheid context, it has also diluted the concept to the extent that it has been amenable to appropriation by capitalist discourses of development. This is aptly demonstrated by the sentences that follow Mandela’s description of *ubuntu* as the sharing of food with travelers: “That is one aspect of *Ubuntu* but it will have various aspects. *Ubuntu* does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?” In other words, post-apartheid *ubuntu* is about achieving financial prosperity in a way that enables your community to flourish and that percolates into one’s surroundings, thus paving the way towards racial reconciliation.⁶⁸

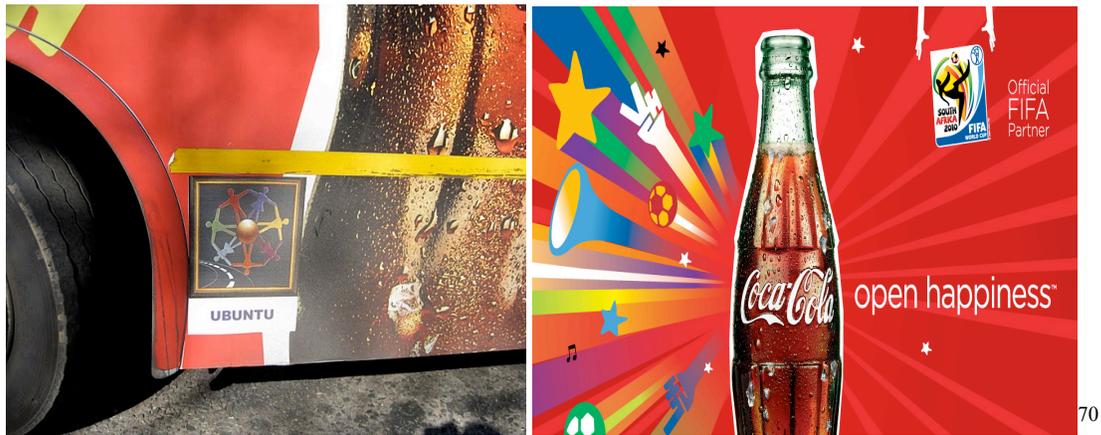
More problematically, these discourses of reconciliation have been conflated with the often exploitative ends of global capital, evident in the popular culture surrounding the 2010 FIFA World Cup. I explore the transformation of *ubuntu* into a nationalist and

⁶⁸ In his attempt to formulate a coherent notion of *ubuntu* that fits a contemporary South Africa, Thaddeus Metz points out how the African distaste of individualist thinking about wealth translates into the contemporary context: “It is immoral to create wealth largely on a competitive basis, as opposed to a cooperative one. In many traditional African societies land is ultimately owned in common and it is held that labor should be undertaken for the sake of the community, neither in order to make a profit in light of demand nor simply to care for one’s immediate family. The “empire building” of a Warren Buffet is anathema here, where the point of work should not be to amass wealth for oneself or for its own sake, but rather to benefit others. That is one reason why so many African societies adopted (quasi-)socialist economic systems after independence in the post-war era; free markets seemed, if not inherently wrong, then at least something that would hinder morally desirable behavior. And one continues to find contemporary African thinkers railing against Western “brash competitiveness,” “single-minded commercialism,” “unbridled individualism,” and “morally blind, purely economic logic,” instead tending to favor certain kinds of cooperatives.” See Thaddeus Metz, “Toward an African Moral Theory,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15.3 (2007): 321–341.

capitalist discourse linked to the development of a global economy through my findings from a month's fieldwork in Johannesburg in July 2010 just after the 2010 world cup ended. During my visit, I interviewed about 20 native speakers of Bantu languages such as Xhosa and Zulu from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, ranging from gardeners, taxi drivers, tour group operators, waiters and receptionists to graduate students in African literature departments. The majority of the people I interviewed had been reminded, on radio shows, television, advertisements and in official announcements, to treat foreign tourists with *ubuntu* in the run up to the 2010 FIFA world cup, not letting them become targets of crime since they were bringing global capital to the local economy. These sentiments were repeatedly enforced by public figures such as Phil "Chippa" Masinga, 2010 World Cup ambassador, who expressed the fear that the violence may ruin the World Cup altogether: "People from outside the country will not want to come and attend these tournaments to avoid possible attacks on them." Majimbo's coach Teboho "Tebza Ngwana" Moloji added that such violence would not "be good for us as Africans. We black South Africans were taught about the spirit of *ubuntu* when we grew up. The African brothers and sisters should be accommodative to each other."⁶⁹ This conflation of discourses of racial reconciliation and global capital through *ubuntu* is also apparent from the images I spotted on the backs and sides of buses all over Johannesburg.

⁶⁹ "Can Soccer Stop the Violence?" Dave Zirin, Accessed July 2010, <http://www.thenation.com/article/can-soccer-stop-violence>.

Figure 1



In this advertisement, Coca Cola, one of the major official sponsors of the FIFA world cup, becomes a vehicle of *ubuntu* through the world cup. Drinking coca cola is to “open happiness” by opening oneself to the spirit of *ubuntu*. The *ubuntu* logo in the first image depicts people of all colors of the rainbow, thereby symbolizing Mandela’s concept of the rainbow nation, holding hands whilst standing around a football. The image suggests that opening a coke bottle while watching the world cup unites people of all races by imbuing them with the spirit of *ubuntu*. The problems with such a message were raised by a prominent newspaper, *The Nation*, which pointed out that “the soccer stars are without question courageous in raising their voice against the senseless violence. But it sounds somewhat superficial to ask *ubuntu* from the poor, when the only *ubuntu* they see exists among South Africa's postapartheid elite. It's an elite that demands they silently accept the demolition of their communities for the good of both the country as well as the World Cup.” Similarly, in May, *Le Monde Diplomatique* wrote about the World Cup preparations that "construction--and corruption--is booming. But almost none of the

⁷⁰ Photos taken by author in Johannesburg, July 2010.

buildings or the money can be accessed by the poor who live in shantytowns without proper water, sanitation or electricity." The article points out the \$9.5 billion in state deficit spending (\$4.3 billion in direct subsidies and another \$5.2 billion in luxury transport infrastructure) that works out to about \$200 per citizen for "a series of policies that the citizens of this proud nation would never have accepted if not wrapped in the honor of hosting the cup. Meanwhile, housing prices in the twenty-first century have gone up 92 percent, while wages have risen a mere 8 percent." The article concludes that this World Cup is not for the poor—it is the soccer elites of FIFA, the elites of domestic and international corporate capital and the political elites who are making billions and who will be benefiting at the expense of the poor.⁷¹ *Ubuntu*, then, has become a vehicle for the development of a global economy grounded in capitalist modes of production. Because it is a symbolic signifier of humanity supposedly grounded in local traditions, *ubuntu* serves as a veil for the actual work of alienation and systematic oppression that the global economy does, functioning as a convenient platitude to smooth over racial and economic divisions in post-apartheid South Africa.

Ubuntu as a Contextualized Manifestation of a Core Humanist Concept

Significantly however, as I elaborate in Chapter Three through my reading of nineteenth century Zulu praise poetry, it is possible to trace the ideas of interdependent

⁷¹ The article continues to point out that the ANC government calls any dissent from being an uncritical World Cup booster, "Afropessimism," boosting the idea that Africa is not up to hosting such an event Danny Jordaan the portentously titled Chief Executive Officer of the 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa, lamented to Reuters, "For the first time in history, Africa really will be the centre of the world's attention—for all the right reasons—and we are looking forward to showing our continent in its most positive light." "Can Soccer Stop the Violence?" Dave Zirin, Accessed July 2010, <http://www.thenation.com/article/can-soccer-stop-violence>.

humanity central to *ubuntu*, including “a person is a person through other people,” before they were implicated in colonialist discourses of global capital. I demonstrate how “a person is a person through other people” extended to political systems and to regulating the behavior of rulers. The discourse of *ubuntu* articulated in traditional Zulu texts described and sanctioned the sharing of power in a communal food economy that was intra tribal and concentrated in the chief so that the sharing of food and cattle between a chief and his subjects served as metaphors for the sharing of power. Zulu praise poems, folk tales, proverbs and riddles served as vehicles for these metaphors, functioning as self regulating mechanisms that, through the literary devices of a repetitive multivocality, enacted the democratic ideal “a chief is a chief through other people.” This connection became increasingly clear; I found that the communal ideals that buttressed democratic Zulu political systems are still articulated through the trope of sharing food in recognition of the humanness of fellow South Africans. For instance, Nelson Mandela explained *ubuntu* in these terms: “A traveler through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him.”⁷² This kind of generosity is also referred to by Archbishop Desmond Tutu who defines *ubuntu* so: “When we want to give high praise to someone we say, “Yu, u nobuntu;” “Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.” Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours.”⁷³

⁷² “The Ubuntu Experience,” Nelson Mandela, Accessed July 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODQ4WiDsEBQ>

⁷³ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), 31.

Furthermore, in multiple African cultures, metaphors regarding amounts of food eaten, distributed, or stolen still serve as a gage for the quality of political rule. For instance, the political theorist Jean Francis Bayart demonstrates how the size of the politician's "belly" functions as a critical metaphor for a nepotistic, corrupt African State in which government and business elite use their influence to enrich themselves, their families or ethnic kinsmen.⁷⁴ Use of such metaphors serve as a popular critical mechanism by which to sanction democratic rule and challenge the misuse of political power. As Achille Mbembe has written, "non official cultures are in fact intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which these systems are confirmed or deconstructed" and the belly is the "principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power...the obesity of men in power, their impressive physique or, more crudely, the flow of shit which results from such a physique – these appeal to a people who can enjoy themselves with mockery and laughter...They thus become part of a system of signs that the *commandement* leaves, like tracks, as it passes on its way, and so make it possible for someone to follow the trail of violence and domination that is intrinsic to the *commandement*."⁷⁵ A political vocabulary of critique, replete with eating metaphors, still exists in the common idioms of politicized subjects. Furthermore, from some of my interviews it also became apparent that, in the rural areas of South Africa, *ubuntu* still has a lot to do with the formation of communal food economies that represent a democratic form of rule between a "chief" and his subjects. For instance, one of my interviewees, a Xhosa gardener in Johannesburg in his 40s and originally from a village

⁷⁴ Jean Francis Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the belly*, (London: Longman Group, 1993).

⁷⁵ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 107.

in the Eastern Cape, described *ubuntu* as integral to a system of electing a “small chief” in his village:

The people choose someone with *ubuntu*. Who is not selfish. If he changes his behaviour, we remove him and choose someone else unless he apologizes. You can criticize him if you don't like something he does, you can call him and sit down with him. He is not allowed to work since his primary work is to serve his people, so we pool our money and our cows and goats and bring them to him. But if you cannot afford to give him anything, that is okay too. A chief with *ubuntu* should never ask for anything. He should just take what he is given. We say to him ‘don't treat people badly just because you are a chief, don't sell land to them. Because we make you responsible for the whole village, you are just supposed to give it to us. Don't take money from people who cannot afford to give you anything.’ If our boys are fighting we take him to the chief, not to the police and he decides whether they have to go to the police or not. This small chief is our real government, not the local government. They have nothing to do with us.

This fascinating oral history, occasioned by my questions about *ubuntu*, testifies to the survival of traditional democracies and communal economies in rural areas based on informal systems of giving and taking. As I elaborate in chapter Three, these communal systems of giving and taking produced democratic behaviors in which a “chief was a chief through other people.” My interviews, then, demonstrated that it is possible to trace alternative indigenous discourses of modernity, framed independently of colonialist paradigms, by empirically evaluating how core humanist concepts were also manifested in pre-colonial societies. Ideas such as the South African humanist ideal, *ubuntu*, were “contextual universalisms,” or responses to local discourses and structures of power that differed from the colonized, globalized humanisms that such universalizing ideas often became in post-colonial contexts.

Contextually Universalist Ideals of Individual Freedom and Agency

In this section, I elaborate that the existence and trace-ability of these non-colonialist indigenous ideas testify that modern humanisms can both universalizing yet sensitive to contextual differences. In the process, these humanisms contest dismissals of universalisms such as democratic ideals or individual freedom on the grounds that the latter lack correlates in other cultures, and are necessarily imperialist imports into other cultural contexts. My reading of Krupabai Sathianadhan's ideas of individual freedom in Chapter Four confirms that while the imposition of British discourses of individual freedom were imperialist, there were non-colonialist, context specific discourses of individual freedom, or "contextual universalisms," that were being articulated in indigenous literatures.

It is my hope that such a recognition provides a valuable way out of the impasse reached by feminist debates about individual freedom; these have often formed opposing coalitions regarding the usefulness of universalizing categories for emancipatory politics. On one side, Nussbaum suggests that humanisms need to be framed as universalizing discourses: "all, just by being human, are of equal dignity and worth, no matter where they are situated in society, and that the primary source of this worth is a power of moral choice within them, a power that consists in the ability to plan a life in accordance with one's own evaluation of ends." Nussbaum defines a free society as one in which "people must receive treatment that respects and promotes the liberty of choice, and ...respect and

promote the equal worth of persons as choosers.”⁷⁶ She promotes this liberty of choice through her “capabilities approach,” which argues that the human is born with certain “capabilities” all of which need to be fulfilled for a person to be truly free in the sense of having “equal worth as a chooser,” and therefore, to live a fully human life. These capabilities include life (normal life expectancy); bodily health; bodily integrity (freedom of movement, freedom from violent assault, opportunities for sexual satisfaction, and reproductive choices); being able to use the senses, imagination, reason, and thought; being able to plan one’s life in accordance with one’s own conception of the good; being able to love and to play; being able to shape one’s political environment through the rights of political participation, association, and free speech; and through equal opportunity for employment that allows one to work as a fully human being ‘exercising practical reason.’⁷⁷ The ethical force of the capabilities approach lies precisely in its universality. According to Nussbaum, all human beings are framed as being born with these capabilities and must be provided with conditions and choices that enable their flourishing.

Nussbaum’s approach is convincing because she does not represent her list of human capabilities as eternally ‘true’ or as ‘human nature.’ Rather, it has emerged out of human experience, in a context of cross cultural inquiry, as a response to the question, “What activities characteristically performed by human beings are so central that they seem definitive of a life that is truly human?” Thus Nussbaum’s account of the human “is

⁷⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 57.

⁷⁷ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 41.

both open ended and humble; it can always be contested and remade.”⁷⁸ This means that Nussbaum’s humanism is not grounded in transhistorical claims about the human person, although the human person and, more specifically, her capacity for moral choice clearly authorize Nussbaum’s inquiry and provide its ethical rationale.

Other thinkers such as Carol Quillen, however, perceive Nussbaum’s approach as flawed in its ignorance of contextual difference, in particular the “difference making mechanisms,” or tools, which structure people into unfair hierarchies, such as, for instance, the institution of the family, which often undermines emancipatory aspirations. In assuming a universal definition of the human, Nussbaum obscures these difference making mechanisms so that we are unlikely to ask the central question: “how do human persons come to imagine themselves as autonomous moral choosers at all?”⁷⁹ As Saba Mahmood concurs in *Politics of Piety*, using Judith Butler’s theorizations of agency, a person’s mode of exercising “choice” and agency is always heavily dependent on the “difference making mechanisms,” that have produced them as individuals in the first place, whether they are Western subjects or non-Western ones. Thus she redefines the concept of agency:

I want to suggest we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 40.

⁷⁹ Quillen, “Feminist Theory, Justice and the Lure of the Human,” 100.

⁸⁰ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 18.

Since a person's choice is never fully their choice, but also the choice of the discourses and material circumstances that have produced them, Mahmood questions the very idea of individual autonomy. The corollary is her argument for "uncoupling the notion of self realization from that of the autonomous will."⁸¹

However, Mahmood's claim that one must question the idea of individual autonomy overlooks that it is precisely the "illusion of choice" that leads to the "self realization" she talks about. Given that Mahmood's subjects think they are exercising individual autonomy, that they are "choosing" to submit to God's will, is it not the illusion of choice that leads to self-fulfillment in the first place? If yes, then can we still question, the way Mahmood does, the link between the notion of self-fulfillment and individual autonomy? Judged by the capabilities approach, after all, these women are making choices and "flourishing," even if they are not following liberal ideals. Thus even though Mahmood argues that "the desire for freedom and liberation is a liberal and historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori"⁸² her analysis suggests otherwise. While we cannot define exactly what shape this freedom may take, the women in the mosque movement are clearly exercising freedom as autonomy in their daily lives, though outside the purview of liberal humanist manifestations of that autonomy.

As Mahmood herself points out, her subjects read their failures to approximate an Islamic ideal of femininity as "a marker of an inadequately formed self" which causes

⁸¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 14.

⁸² Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent," *Cultural Anthropology*, 16:2. (2001), 223.

them to “undertake a specific series of steps to rectify the situation.” While the subjects’ corrective actions do depend on the prior repeated performances of normative virtues that Butler outlines in her theory of agency,⁸³ or the “difference making mechanisms” that constitute them, their actions in relation to these virtues are based on a *perception* of choice, the choice to act in accordance with God’s will and thereby glean self-fulfillment. A universal definition of freedom and agency tied to the notion of self-fulfillment, yet that differs in its contextual specificities from liberal humanist, secular manifestations of individual freedom, still implicitly survives in Mahmood’s study.

A survival of such ideas in Mahmood’s analysis, then, makes the case for “contextual universalisms” that acknowledge the universality of individual freedom while still taking into account the difference making mechanisms that affect the choices individuals make.⁸⁴ The *bildungsroman* by Krupabai Satthianadhan that I read in Chapter Four poses just such a contextually universalist idea of agency; Satthianadhan defines individual freedom as the power to exercise choice and make decisions without

⁸³ See Mahmood’s discussion of Butler’s theory of agency. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 164.

⁸⁴ What I am suggesting throws up two controversial questions that remain central to a lot of feminist debates about women’s rights in non-Western cultures: Is a choice still a free choice if it is subconscious or unaware of the discourses that have produced it as a choice? And is a choice still a free choice if the choice ends up proving harmful to one’s overall interests? For instance, what can one say, according to this framework, to the (admittedly rare) woman who chooses to be circumcised? Would telling her that the choice is a harmful one, and that she cannot make it, be tantamount to an imperialist standpoint? The capabilities approach suggests the answer to this in its assertion that a truly free choice can only be made if the context in which a woman has made the choice is in line with Nussbaum’s list of human capabilities; Nussbaum would suggest that we cannot call a woman’s choice to be circumcised a free choice if she does not have alternatives easily available to her. However if a woman is aware of alternatives to the choice she has made, yet chooses to be circumcised anyway, it is a truly free choice. The capabilities approach, then, aims to create conditions in which alternative choices are not only available to individuals, but which make it easier for them to pursue all choices equally.

constraint. Yet, her universalizing assertions of individual freedom rely on a physical body that interprets conditions as oppressive or liberating according to affective sensations grounded in local structures of feeling. Such contextually universalist humanisms contest dismissals of universalisms by demonstrating the latter's non-imperialist libratory potential in other cultural contexts.

In the following chapters, I explore such literary “contextual universalisms” in Oriyan devotional poetry, Zulu praise poetry, and the Indian *bildungsroman* in English, turning to these oft overlooked texts as valuable sources with which to rewrite colonial histories. As Mohanty points out, literary readings of such indigenous texts can carry out an interdisciplinary project of historical recovery, thereby reconceptualizing “what we often condescendingly call the ‘premodern.’”⁸⁵ In this vein, I retrieve and highlight the unique, and startlingly modern, manifestations of rationality, democratic ideals, and individual freedom that defined South African and Indian indigenous modernities.

⁸⁵ See Mohanty, “Alternative Modernities and Medieval Indian Literature: the Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* As Radical Pedagogy,” 3–21.

Chapter 2: Radical Religious Rationalities in Colonial Indian Poetry

In March 1881, an incident took place in the Orissan city of Puri, located in Eastern India, that shook the Brahminical religious authorities, as well as the colonial establishment that buttressed them,⁸⁷ to the core.⁸⁸ A group of fifteen followers of Mahima Dharma, an ascetic religious movement founded in late nineteenth century Orissa by non-Brahmin priests, marched to Puri and stormed its famous Jagannath temple compound. The press and police reports make clear that the Mahima Dharmis, reportedly in Puri under the influence of their adivasi⁸⁹ Guru, Bhīma Bhoi,⁹⁰ tried to remove the idols of Jagannath, Subhadra and Balarama in order to burn them, reflecting an uncompromising stand on idolatry, sacred hierarchies and temple rituals. The reports brand the group as rioters, criminals, savages and fanatics for committing an act so

⁸⁷ Colonial presuppositions about the role of sacred texts in ‘religion’ predisposed Orientalists towards focusing upon such texts as the essential foundation for understanding the Hindu people, resulting in the literate Brahmins, for whom religious texts like the Vedas and Shastras were central, becoming representative of the Hindu religion, and enjoying elevated social, economic and political status. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 101-102.

⁸⁸ The colonial law keepers underscored the irrationality of the Mahima Dharmis by defining them as lunatics and fanatics. The Utkala Deepika, an Oriya newspaper patronized by the upper classes, stressed the lowly origin and filthy habits of the attackers. Ishita Bannerjee Dube, *Religion, Law and Power*, (London: Anthem Press, 2007), 51.

⁸⁹ The term ‘adivasi’ was coined in the 1930s by the British to refer to the original inhabitants of a given region and also carries the connotation of past autonomy disrupted by the British.

⁹⁰ In truth, Bhīma’s involvement in this incident is questionable. The Sambalpur District Gazettier only linked him to the events decades later in 1908 because the instigators marched to Puri from Sambalpur, which is where Bhīma emerged as the main leader of the faith after Mahima Swami’s death. See Ishita Bannerjee Dube, *Religion, Law and Power*, (London: Anthem Press, 2007), 53. See also Ishita Bannerjee-Dube “Issues of Faith, Enactment of Contest: The Founding of Mahima Dharma in Nineteenth Century Orissa,” in *Jagannath Revisited* ed. H. Kulke and B. Schepnel, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001),149-177.

revolutionary that it has been eliminated from the collective memory of an increasingly Brahminized community. This willed forgetting is not surprising given that Bhīma's devotional verses, despite being written by a mere adivasi, challenge the authority of the Brahminical priestly and intellectual class. Asserting himself as a writer who deserves respect despite his social background, he defiantly declares that his poetry is not the result of any scriptural knowledge, but of his own experiences as a tribal: "It is a jest of my Guru that my eyes cannot see./ I mastered no Vedas or Sastras./ I compose my verse with my mind, through my experience, peering into the Void."⁹¹

Bhīma Bhoi (18-- - 1895) was the saint poet of Mahima Dharma, literally the "glorious dharma," which advocated devotion to an all-pervasive, formless Absolute, equally accessible to all, as the way to salvation. This seemingly simple message rendered the worship of idols (murtipuja) redundant, including that of Jagannath, the central deity of Hinduism in Orissa and the state deity for centuries, and questioned hierarchies of caste and kinship (jatigata bibheda), and the role of the Brahmins as mediators between gods and men. Therefore, Bhīma rejected the ritual use of the tulsi plant, a high symbol of the Sanskritic and Brahmanic Hindu identity, and in a radical reversal of social conventions, refused to accept food from Brahmins. Mahima Swami, the faith's founding Guru, preached in the distant territories of the tributary states, inhabited predominantly by lower caste, untouchable and indigenous peoples. Mahima Dharma, then, was "doubly subaltern;" not only geographically and epistemologically

⁹¹ Johannes Beltz and Bettina Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2010), 175.

separate from the colonizing powers, but also separate from powerful groups within Indian society itself.⁹²

Bhīma Bhoi was voicing his challenge to Brahminical authority, from the peripheral tribal regions of Orissa, during the height of the colonial period. This was the same time that Swami Vivekananda, the famous nineteenth century reformer of Hinduism, was bolstering Brahminical, Vedic interpretations of Hinduism for the colonialists and educated nationalists in metropolitan regions of India and the Western world. Unlike Vivekananda, however, Bhīma derived his “criticism of the Hindu tradition directly from the tradition itself,”⁹³ drawing from the diverse intellectual traditions that tribal Orissan society was steeped in. His devotional verse collections, the *Stuti Chintamani* and *Bhajan Mala*, identify him with a number of regional intellectual and narrative traditions such as the panchasakha, the group of sixteenth century poet saints who wrote for the masses in vernacular Oriya rather than in Sanskrit for the educated elite. In doing so, he was also drawing on the legacy of the low caste, fifteenth century farmer Sarala Das who produced vernacular Oriya versions of the Sanskrit ancient Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and who was widely known and revered as “sudra muni,” or low caste sage. Rather than drawing from the Sanskrit Vedas and Shastras of high caste Hinduism,⁹⁴ Bhīma got his conception of Brahman as Alekha, or

⁹² Bannerjee Dube, *Religion, Law and Power*, 8.

⁹³ Anncharlott Eschmann, “Mahima Dharma: An Autochthonous Hindu Reform Movement” in *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, eds. Anncharlott Eschmann, Herman Kulke and Tripathi, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), 375.

⁹⁴ Mahima Dharma consists of two monastic orders from different sections of society. The unorthodox kaupinadharis in western Orissa are mostly from marginalized castes and the bakkaladharis at Joranda, with their highly organized, regulated monastery, from rich farming castes. For an account of the conflicts between the two see Johannes Beltz, “Contested

the “unwritten,” as well as his concept of “sunya,” or “the void,” from the Nagarjuna Buddhist and Tantric influences that had saturated rural, tribal Orissa for centuries.⁹⁵ Bhīma drew on symbolic tantric cosmology to portray the divine and the worshipper’s body as containing and creating the entire universe.⁹⁶ His yoga was influenced by the tantra of the Siddhas and Nath Yogis,⁹⁷ emphasizing the importance of the subtle body, its chakras, and the rising of Kundalini Sakti,⁹⁸ elements purged by the mainstream Jagannath cults. Furthermore, Bhīma’s language of bhakti, that of devotion and total

Authorities, Disputed Centres and Rejected Norms: Situating Mahima Dharma in its Regional Diversity,” in *Periphery and Centre: Studies in Orissan History, Religion and Anthropology*, ed. G. Pfeffer, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2006), 86-93.

⁹⁵ ‘Alekh’ suggests that the Absolute that is Brahman cannot be represented, defined, seen or written about. Alekha comes from the Sanskrit root ‘lekh’ or ‘likh’ which means to write. ‘A lekh,’ then, means that which is ‘unwritten,’ an implicit challenge to the educated Brahmin religious authorities and the colonial institutionalization of their written texts.

⁹⁶ Bhīma Bhoi was very much influenced by tantric cosmology that suggested that all the elements of the universe, including the ancient yogis and places of pilgrimage, exist in one’s own body. In tantric sadhana the body is a link between outer and inner; one can discover the divinity within oneself by using the body as a container of the divinity without. Bhīma therefore instructs the devotee to “locate within your body the holy pilgrimages of the outside world. None so foolish as a yogi who wanders from place to place on the earth.” The way to “journey into your body and create therein the vast universe” is to “perform the rites of yoga.” There the yogi will find that, “the slave of the Lord contains within all nine continents, and the infinite universe.” See also Bettina Baumer, “Tantric Elements in Bhīma Bhoi’s Ouvre” in *Popular Religion and Ascetic Practices: New Studies on Mahima Dharma*, eds. Ishita Bannerjee-Dube and Johannes Beltz, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2008).

⁹⁷ A Siddha in Sanskrit means one who has reached spiritual enlightenment. The Sanskrit word, *nāthā*, denotes the path towards enlightenment and the word itself is a synonym for Brahman. The Nath tradition, a subsect of the siddha tradition, was founded by Matsyendranath, a simple fisherman, in the 8th century, and further developed by Gorakshanath. These two individuals are revered in Nagarjuna Buddhism for perfected spiritual attainment. The Natha Sampradaya does not recognize caste barriers, and was adopted by outcasts and kings alike. The language of the Natha yogis is the sandhya bhasa which influenced Panchasakha literature.

⁹⁸ Kundalini shakti, Sanskrit for “serpent power,” is energy thought to reside within the sleeping body like a coiled serpent in the root chakra (the centre of subtle energy) at the base of the spine, and is aroused through spiritual discipline to bring about enlightenment. In Tantra Yoga, kundalini is an aspect of Shakti, the divine female energy and consort of Shiva.

surrender to the Guru who embodies the Divine, was drawing on the influence of Orissa's medieval bhakti poets. His references to the Krishna story also have a slight Vaishnav tinge, though one derived from regional folk theatre, and not written texts. Bhīma's universalizing assertions of equal, rational social organization, which I explore in this chapter, then, were contextually grounded in local, pre-colonial intellectual cultures.

This chapter focuses on Bhīma's collections of popular devotional verses, the *Stuti Chintamani* and *Bhajan Mala*,⁹⁹ sung even today during the ritual worship of Brahman. The context of its recitation is a ritual called "dhuni," devoted to Alekha, where a ritual fire is burnt and his verses are recited accompanied by regional instruments. Diverse traditional, popular and local tunes are used as melodies. The songs are sung fervently by often illiterate devotees and babas, although their content is full of highly philosophical and mystical ideas that are far from simple. The verse structure of the text, which draws on the structure of bhakti poetry, facilitates its function as devotional text meant to be memorized and chanted by the devotee, while mirroring the logical, 'rational' sequence of the philosophizing the poetry tries to convey. While Bhīma's poetry is composed systematically, "with due regard to metre, rhythm and musicality," and conveys a rational philosophy of social equality, his language is the "twilight language," or "intentional language," the sandhya bhasa, full of paradoxes and contradictions or 'upside down' expressions (*ulta – bamsi*). It is the mystical, paradoxical

⁹⁹ Bhīma Bhoi's Oriya text is very popular but there are only three accurate translations in English. I use the latest complete and scholarly 2010 translation by Johannes Beltz and Bettina Baumer, long time scholars of Mahima Dharma, and supplement it with Sidharth Satpathy's 2006 translation of *Stuti Chintamani*. For other bhajanas not in the above translations, I use Sitakant Mahapatra's 1983 translations. See Johannes Beltz and Bettina Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2010). Siddharth Satpathy, *Bhīma Bhoi, Prayers and Reflections, Selections from Stuticintamani*, (Bhubaneswar: Rupantar, 2006). And Sitakant Mahapatra, *Bhīma Bhoi*, (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1983).

language of the Buddhist siddhas and nath yogis.¹⁰⁰ It is characterized by spontaneous rhetoric, as described by A.K. Ramanujan and developed by Linda Hess who calls it “rough rhetoric,” containing a combination of “rudeness and potency” as well as “simplicity and bluntness of style.”¹⁰¹ This is a phrase particularly apt for Bhīma Bhoi who belongs to the category of grassroots vernacular religious poets, and certainly shares the qualities of spontaneity and “rough rhetoric.”

Bhīma’s *Stuti Chintamani* and *Bhajan Mala*, then, are counterhegemonic texts in both form and content. As I show in the textual analysis below, Bhīma articulates his subaltern consciousness and calls for social change by highlighting the rationality that was the basis of his thought. His focus on rationality is particularly important because both during his own time, and today, his ideas were dismissed as irrational by elements at the top of the colonial and religious hierarchy who found them threatening. In the larger colonial context, his conceptions of rationality were very different from Swami Vivekananda’s, the nineteenth century reformer of Hinduism who highlighted the rationality of the Vedas for a Western audience by charting out a course of Hindu nationalism replete with Western scientific discourses of rationality. As I argue, the nationalist reform movements of which Vivekananda was a pioneer had little or no

¹⁰⁰ The first known instance of the “sandhya bhasa” was found in the 8th-12th century Vajrayana Buddhist caryagiti, or “songs of realization,” from the tantric folk tradition in eastern India. The language exemplifies some of the earliest instances of the Assamese, Oriya, Maithili and Bengali languages. The writers of the Charyapada were the Buddhist Mahasiddhas or *Siddhacharyas* of the various regions of Assam, Bengal, Orissa and Bihar. The sandhya bhasa literally means the ‘Twilight Language’ in Sanskrit, or *Alo-andhari* (half expressed and half concealed). However, later evidence from a number of Buddhist texts suggests that it was called the “Intentional language,” or the *Sandha-bhasa* in Sanskrit. See Prabhat Mukherjee, “The Sidhacharyas in Orissa” in *The History of Medieval Vaishnavism in Orissa*, (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1981), 55.

¹⁰¹ Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 61-62.

grassroots support for their ideas; the Brahmo Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission imposed their reformist ideals from above in alliance with the colonial state apparatus and the upper castes.¹⁰² Furthermore, building on Sekhar Bandhopadhyay's argument that Hindu society maintained its cultural hegemony and structure by frustrating reformist endeavors and marginalizing dissidence,¹⁰³ I suggest that nationalist reformist endeavors such as Vivekananda's were themselves inextricable from this process of marginalization; rather than reforming Hindu society into a more egalitarian space, Vivekananda was strengthening its hierarchical structures by consolidating it into an increasingly upwardly mobile, upper caste, English speaking, literate Hindu identity. It is not surprising, then, that he set up secular distinctions between "rational" thought and "mythic" thought by simply suppressing any mythic, tantric or ritualistic elements (which were 'popular' rather than upper caste forms of religiosity) that he found.

Bhīma's conceptions of rationality were also very different from those within his own religious community. The dharma that Visvanath Baba, the leader of the Mahima Dharma sect at Joranda from 1920 to the 1990s, popularized was radically different from what Bhīma thought, since the former ignored Bhīma's revolutionary, dissident or heterodox tenets regarding the equal treatment of women, the stand against casteism, and

¹⁰² Indian caste feudalism was strategically consolidated through an alliance of Brahmanism and colonial state power, calculated for their own benefits. See Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Oxford, 2001) and Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (London: Thousand Oaks, 1994).

¹⁰³ Shekhar Bandhopadhyay, *Caste, Culture, and Hegemony, Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, (London: Sage, 2004).

his favoring of the popular language, the colloquial Oriya. Visvanath Baba himself wrote in highly Sanskritized Oriya, gave ethical and ritual guidelines, prohibitions and commands, discriminated against women, and recognised social stratification based on caste.¹⁰⁴ Most importantly for this argument, however, Visvanath Baba permanently established links between the Sanskritic tradition of Hinduism and Mahima Dharma, underlining that the ‘new’ message of Mahima Swami offered a path of pure, rational, non ritualistic monism that was Vedic in its valences.

Given the rewriting of Bhīma’s radical legacy by some of his followers, it becomes all the more important to highlight the unique, and startlingly modern, rationalities that were central to his thinking and in effecting social change. In doing so, I illuminate Bhīma’s assertion of an alternative modernity, and, in the process, aim to ‘provincialize’ European accounts of modernity without resorting to cultural or historical relativism.¹⁰⁵ Since the dichotomy of rationality vs. irrationality often buttresses the conceptual binaries of modern vs. premodern, one way to explore indigenous modernities is by investigating how forms of rationality arose in non-Western cultures. Indeed, one of the most important defining features of modernity, as I argue in my introduction, has been the suppression and devaluing of non-Western knowledges through the domination of Enlightenment Reason over ‘reason’ in general which Charles Taylor and Harry Frankfurt define as the legacy of human beings in general and which consists of, among other things, the ability to be logically consistent, to separate oneself from one’s

¹⁰⁴ Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 39-40

¹⁰⁵ Mohanty, “Alternative Modernities and Medieval Indian Literature: the Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* As Radical Pedagogy,” 3–21.

immediate context in order to evaluate one's life and one's desires in terms of larger ideas about the world, and the ability to trace one's own cognitive thought patterns.¹⁰⁶ Bhīma Bhoi expresses these rationalities in the aesthetic form of religious poetry, very different from the ways in which Occidental philosophers were doing so. Yet seeing his verses as nothing more than devotional poetry in the colonially constructed epistemic category "religion" would obscure the fascinating theorizations of rationality the aesthetic form enacts. As I suggest in the introduction, drawing on Satya Mohanty, literary readings of such indigenous texts can carry out an interdisciplinary project of historical recovery, thereby reconceptualizing "what we often condescendingly call the "premodern.""¹⁰⁷

To highlight just how radical Bhīma's ideas of rationality were, and how independently they were articulated from colonialist discourses of modernity, I begin with an exploration of how Swami Vivekananda coupled the idea of minimal rationality with Enlightenment discourses of science to lend legitimacy to Hinduism for a Western audience and for the higher caste Hindu landed aristocracy that financed and supported his cause.¹⁰⁸ By way of contrast, I then turn to Bhīma Bhoi who enacts two important and

¹⁰⁶ See Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," 5-20. and Taylor, "Rationality."

¹⁰⁷ Mohanty, "Alternative Modernities and Medieval Indian Literature: the Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* As Radical Pedagogy," 6.

¹⁰⁸ Vivekananda often notes science's supposed ability to understand individual experiences through larger ideas about the world: 'The scientist does not tell you to believe in anything, but he has certain results which come from his own experiences, and, when he asks us to believe in his conclusions, he appeals to some universal experience of humanity.' Swami Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964).

radical philosophies of rationality in his poetry. First, he theorizes rationality from within the local aesthetic epistemes of devotional poetry to resist local Brahmanic power structures and to carve out a modern theory of identity that relies on an individual's actions (karma), rather than their fate (bhagya.) In doing so, Bhīma's poetry testifies to the "knowledge revolution," to use Susan Stanford Friedman's term, that was a crucial component of indigenous alternative modernities; his poetry reflects and produces the cultural structures of feeling and literary languages that emphasized the defining of individuals, in resistance to local and foreign power structures, through their actions rather than through their pre-ordained religious or caste status. In the process of enacting a rationality drawn from Orissan intellectual traditions, Bhima attempts to understand his own social position and desires in light of larger ideas about the world, and also self consciously traces the logical consistency of his cognitive thought patterns.

Second, Bhīma Bhoi couples his rational social critique with a radical positing of secular rationality in the 'ulti bamsi' or upside down language of Orissan tribal religiosity. Thus I examine how, unlike Vivekananda, Bhīma Bhoi enables us to uncover forms of 'secular rationality' in pre-colonial Indian religion relatively uninfluenced by Western theorizations of rationality. My positing of this universal capacity for "secular rationality," however, does not indicate a separation of religious from secular institutions in government; epistemological secularism, according to Talal Asad, precedes political secularism and describes a sensibility or state of mind which distinguished living in myth, magic, ritual and the sacred from a state of mind based on rational understandings of the world.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, my use of this definition implicitly challenges what Jakobsen and

¹⁰⁹ See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Pellegrini describe as Enlightenment secularism, “in which reason progressively frees itself from the bonds of religion and in so doing liberates humanity. This narrative poses religion as a regressive force in the world, one that in its dogmatism is not amenable to change, dialogue or nonviolent conflict resolution, separates secularism from religion” and, in the process, “places secularism in a particular historical tradition, one that is located in Europe and grows out of Christianity.”¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, my alternative investigation of Talal Asad’s “epistemological secularism,” which I suggest is a universal capacity, attempts to unsettle the universalization of this Enlightenment idea of secularism and its positing of religion as “irrational” and in opposition to the category of the “secular.” In doing so, my analysis aims to decolonize the ‘secular’ by highlighting the possibility of alternative secularisms that arose in the non-West, thus legitimizing the epistemic modes through which subalterns often leave behind their intellectual legacies, and recognizing them as modernities in their own right.

Vivekananda’s rationality: a colonial discourse?

Vivekananda’s writings, I argue, can be read as the result of understanding rationality mainly through European Enlightenment categories of knowledge, both because these were the ones he held as superior, and, as Niranjana Dhar has shown, because they enabled him to effectively represent Hinduism to the West and to the colonially backed, upper caste, and English speaking Hindu aristocracy that supported

¹¹⁰ Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini (eds.), *Secularisms (A Social Textbook)*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

him.¹¹¹ I suggest, then, that while Bengali nationalist reform movements such as Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Mission saw themselves as progressive, they took a top down colonialist approach that had little grassroots level support. Rather than reforming Hindu society to the benefit of lower castes and marginalized groups, they were in fact managing subaltern groups for the benefit of the colonizing British and for those upper caste Hindus who had managed to climb into the upper echelons of the colonial hierarchy.¹¹² It is not surprising, then, that like European thinkers at the time, Vivekananda believed that Enlightenment science was the ultimate rationality and therefore legitimized Hinduism through extensive comparisons to science. Last, this section considers how Vivekananda glossed over anything that would have been considered irrational by Western standards. The result is that the indigenous forms of rationality present in, for example, Radha Krishna worship or tantra, remained unexplored and consigned to the category "irrational."

Born Narendranath Dutta in Calcutta, a colonial metropolis, in 1863, Vivekananda was the chief disciple of the 19th century mystic Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa and the founder of Ramakrishna Mission. He is considered a key figure in the introduction of Vedanta and Yoga in Europe and America and is also credited with

¹¹¹ Although the Ramakrishna Movement was originally a lower middle class movement, Vivekananda turned it into an all India success through the financial support of the upper caste Hindu landed aristocracy; his first trip to the US was financed by the Maharajas of Khetri, Ramnad and Mysore. Niranjana Dhar, *Vedanta and the Bengal Renaissance*, (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1977), 134.

¹¹² On a related note, Joya Chatterji argues that Bengali communal identity was constructed largely by the upper caste Hindu class that came into existence as a landed aristocracy favored by the colonial powers. Furthermore, this identity was predicated on dangerous anti-Muslim sentiment. Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge South Asian Studies, 2002).

raising interfaith awareness, bringing Hinduism to the status of a world religion during the end of the 19th century.¹¹³ As Richard King and Ashis Nandy have pointed out, Vivekananda's reform of Hinduism was heavily influenced by Occidental religious discourse and devoted to representing Indian spirituality to the West as rational. In doing so, Vivekananda was one of the key figures involved in what Richard King has called the modern construction of Hinduism, "a process which located the core of Indian religiosity in certain Sanskrit texts (the textualization of Indian religion), and second by an implicit (and sometimes explicit) tendency to define Indian religion in terms of a normative paradigm of religion based upon contemporary Western understandings of the Judaeo-Christian traditions."¹¹⁴ This new episteme created the rising perception that 'Hinduism' had become a corrupt shadow of its former Vedic self, and that the gap between the original Hinduism, and contemporary Hindu beliefs and practices, had to be filled by nationalist Hindu reform movements such as the Brahma Samaj and Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Mission. Vivekananda took on this task with gusto. His thought was developed during attempts to influence Western views of Hinduism over two very long trips to the United States in the 1890s when he founded a Vedanta Society in San Francisco and a Shanti Ashrama (peace retreat.) Returning home from his first trip only

¹¹³ Peter Bernard Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective: A Study of Religious Change in the Modern World*, (London: Routledge 2006), 209.

¹¹⁴ Ashis Nandy writes that Vivekananda associated the West with "power and hegemony, and with a superior civilization," thus attempting to Christianize Hinduism by turning it "into an organized religion with an organized priesthood, church and missionaries." Ashis Nandy, *The intimate enemy: loss and recovery of self under colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 24. King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 105.

It is not surprising, then, that the larger part of Vivekananda's active and productive life coincided with his residence in the West. Amiya P. Sen, *The Indispensable Vivekananda: an anthology of our times*, (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2006), ix.

in 1897, he conducted a whirlwind speaking tour throughout India, and launched a number of English language journals for foreign as well as domestic subscribers. For instance, the Prabuddha Bharata, or Awakened India stated its objective was “to present the truths of the Hindu religion and the Vedanta in a simple and homely style, illustrating them by means of Puranic stories, philosophical tales and novels, and by the lives of great saints and sages.”¹¹⁵ As Srinivas Aravamudan points out, this periodical was a sophisticated theolinguistic organ, featuring stories of Vivekananda’s missionary work, even as it retailed advertisements for photographs of spiritual leaders, “Hindu” timepieces, and books on Indian religion.¹¹⁶

Vivekananda’s ideal of rationality, then, was clearly fashioned according to what a Western audience would find compelling and engaging. More specifically, it was fashioned according to the dictates of European Enlightenment philosophy that was part of a colonialist discourse of modernity, where science was the epitome of the rational, needed to lend legitimacy to Hinduism. Thus he used Enlightenment science to back his representation of rationality in the Hindu philosophy of non-duality, or Advaita, which argues that the self does not exist separately from the divine (Brahman). The concept of Dvaita, meanwhile, describes the opposite, a God outside the self who one must worship. According to Advaita, this concept of the God outside oneself is the unfortunate result of “Maya,” which describes the limited, purely physical and mental reality in which our everyday consciousness has become entangled. Maya survives by preventing the

¹¹⁵ Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 29.

¹¹⁶ Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language*, 55.

individual from becoming one with, or attuned to Brahman. The aim of every human life, or Moksha (spiritual salvation), is the union of the soul with this truth, with Brahman, a condition that Vivekananda sums up as “unity.” He justifies non-duality, his ideal of the ultimate rationality, so:

Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress, because it would reach the goal...chemistry could not progress further when it would discover one element out of which all others could be made. Physics would stop when it would be able to...discover one energy of which all the others are but manifestations, and the science of religion become perfect when it would discover Him who is the one life in a universe of Death. All science is bound to come to this conclusion in the long run...the Hindu is only glad that what he has been cherishing in his bosom for ages is going to be taught in more forcible language, and with further light from the latest conclusions of science.¹¹⁷

Here Vivekananda uses the examples of Chemistry and Physics to suggest that they all point to the “unity” apparent in his non-dualist Hinduism. The most important discovery that Physics and Chemistry can make is discovering the “one energy,” or the “Him” from which all life comes, and all science at its core is engaged in gathering more and more evidence to bolster this point of view. Furthermore, while science can provide evidence for non-dualism as the ultimate truth of the universe, it must not be regarded as higher than Hindu philosophy because the Vedas preceded European science in founding key scientific principles: “there are theories in the Vedic philosophy about the origin of life on this earth very similar to those which have been advanced by some modern European scientists. You, of course, all know that there is a theory that life came from other planets.

¹¹⁷ Swami Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964), 14.

It is a settled doctrine with some Vedic philosophers that life comes in this way, from the moon.¹¹⁸ Vivekananda therefore refers to Raja Yoga as a science rather than a philosophy. “The science of Raja yoga proposes to put before humanity a practical and scientifically worked out method of reaching the divine truth.” Vivekananda further elaborates on the precision and empiricism suggested by the words “practically” and “scientifically worked out method:” in science “a certain method must be followed. You must go to the lab, take different substances, mix them up, compound them, experiment with them, and out of that will come a knowledge of chemistry. If you want to be an astronomer, you must go to an observatory, take a telescope, study the stars and planets, and then you will become an astronomer.”¹¹⁹ In other words, Vivekananda stresses, Hinduism is as rational as Enlightenment science was projected as being, with just as much of a precise empirical method through which to arrive at results.

The problem with this, of course, is that Vivekananda, and the reformist religion he led, ignored any aspects of indigenous rationality that would be considered “irrational” according to Enlightenment epistemes. His dismissal of the “irrational” from Hinduism meant that the indigenous forms of rationality present in, for example, tantric forms of worship, remained categorized as superstition, rather than being seen as ‘rational’ in their own right. Just how much these forces were at work in Vivekananda’s version of Hindu rationality is clear from his representation of his Guru, Sri Ramakrishna and the Ramakrishna Mission, as the embodiment of his idea of a universal religion free of idol worship or tantrism, and of symbolic, ritualistic aspects: “Ay, long before ideas of

¹¹⁸ Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, 130.

¹¹⁹ Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, 91.

universal religion and brotherly feeling between different sects were mooted and discussed in any country in the world, here, in sight of this city, had been living a man whose whole life was a Parliament of Religions, as it should be.”¹²⁰ This did not only involve diluting the specificities of Hindu religiosity into a whitewashed, general “universal religion,” but also actively hiding those aspects that would not be acceptable to a “Parliament of Religions.” In fact Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who Vivekananda first met in November 1881 did believe in the worship of deities; he had been a priest of the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, dedicated to the goddess Kali, which was influenced by the main strands of the devotional Bengali bhakti tradition. Ramakrishna was also a tantric, or someone who studied the use of the body as a vehicle towards Moksha, or salvation, in both sexual and non-sexual ways; his first spiritual teacher was an ascetic woman skilled in tantra and Vaishnava *bhakti*. Vivekananda actively overlooked these elements, taking up only those elements of Ramakrishna’s thought that supported his theories of non-dualism.¹²¹

In his quest to refashion Ramakrishna’s religious sensibility into one agreeable to a Western audience, Vivekananda adamantly worked to rewrite Ramakrishna’s biography

¹²⁰ Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, 235.

¹²¹ Scholars such as Walter Neevel have pointed out that Ramakrishna was sanitized into a benign, saintly figure to ‘renew and ‘authenticate’ the Hindu religious tradition for a Western educated Indian middle class. The saint was also depicted as an advaitin, wholly consistent with Vivekananda’s Hinduism. Walter G. Neevel, *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, (Brill Archive, 1976), 53-97. Partha Chatterjee and Sumit Sarkar argue that the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, by Ramakrishna devotee Mahendranath Gupta, is more revealing of the ‘fears and anxieties’ of the urban middle class who appropriated Ramakrishna, than of the man himself. Partha Chatterjee in *Subaltern Studies*, vol. 7, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993). Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 282-358.

so that few of these elements survived. As Narasingha P. Sill has shown, he cautioned biographers to avoid “all irregular indecent expressions about sex because other nations think it the height of indecency to mention such things, and his life in English is going to be read by the whole world.” He wrote to another biographer: “Take thought, get materials, write a sketch of Ramakrishna, studiously avoiding all miracles. The life should be written as an illustration of the doctrines he preached.” Vivekananda also preached against Radha-Krsna worship, something that would have sorely troubled his master. In April 1897 he wrote to the latest Bengali biographer of Ramakrishna: “There is not the least necessity for teaching the divine love of Radha and Krishna. Remember that the episodes of the divine relationship between Radha and Krishna are quite unsuitable for young minds.” Later he elaborated: “And wherever you hear the Radha-Krishna songs going on, use the whip right and left. The whole nation is going to rack and ruin! People with no self-control indulging in such songs!”¹²² Furthermore, idol worship for Vivekananda was a stunted, infantile version of rationality that humans partook in when they were not capable of anything better: “External worship, material worship,” say the scriptures, “is the lowest stage; struggling to rise high, mental prayer is the next stage, but the highest stage is when the Lord has been realized...One thing I must tell you. Idolatry in India...is the attempt of undeveloped minds to grasp high spiritual truths...Idols or temples or churches or books are only the supports, the helps, of his spiritual childhood: but on and on he must progress.”¹²³ Vivekananda had no time for deities or their tantric

¹²²Sil, Narasingha P., "Vivekānanda's Rāmakrishna: An Untold Story of Mythmaking and Propaganda" *Numen* 40. 1, (Jan., 1993): 38-62.

¹²³ Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, 15-18.

associations; his dismissal of the ‘irrational’ from Hinduism and his reframing of Hinduism into a “Parliament of Religions” relegated indigenous forms of rationality present in, for example, Radha Krishna worship to the category of “superstition,” and, unlike Bhīma Bhoi’s rationality, also fashioned Hindu religiosity into a mirror of Western religiosity by actively seeking out the West as its main influence and audience. In the process, Vivekananda also bolstered the cultural hegemony of the upper caste Hindus who financed him.

rational Others: Bhīma Bhoi

Like Vivekananda, Bhīma Bhoi practiced and theorized his own conceptions of religious rationality, but he did so through devotional poetry that tapped into forms of “popular” religiosity that were becoming increasingly marginalized by movements such as Vivekananda’s. I therefore turn to his work, as well as the various religious and intellectual traditions from which he drew inspiration, as examples of how rational states of mind arose in pre-colonial India in forms of knowledge now classified as “religious,” as well as how they harnessed popular movements of resistance against irrational social hierarchies. This section begins with an exploration of the form Bhīma’s devotional poetry took, before tracing the specific rationalities in his poetry; drawing on Charles Taylor and Harry Frankfurt I outline the three distinct ways in which Bhīma asserted his rationality. He consistently detached himself from his immediate context as a poor, low caste tribal to evaluate how his life fit into larger ideas about the world, he reflected on and evaluated his own desires in light of his position as an outcaste, and self consciously traced his own logical and cognitive thought patterns within his verse. Most importantly,

2000 stanzas in 100 bolis, drawing attention to the magnitude of his work, and by corollary his devotion to Alekha and the importance of his radical social message. Bhīma also drew on the structure of bhakti poetry to formulate his text, facilitating its function as devotional text meant to be memorized and chanted by the devotee. Bhakti poetry starts with a ghosa or refrain repeated by the entire group of devotional singers and ends with a “signature line” expressing a prayer or an intense feeling. That the aesthetic form of the *Stuti Chintamoni* is suitable for memorizing is not surprising given that this text was and is still largely transmitted orally, though a number of palm leaf manuscripts still exist. Although these aspects are difficult to see in the written English translations I quote, I emphasize the way the logical sequence of the verse structure mirrors the rational progression of Bhīma Bhoi’s thought and his investment in the merits of rational social organization.

Bhīma uses his devotional verse to reflect three major explorations of rationality, the first of which is the ability to separate oneself from one’s immediate context to evaluate one’s life in terms of larger ideas about the world. In line with this notion, Bhīma argues that the self can only unite with Brahman once one extricates oneself from Maya. Maya describes our immediate context, the limited physical and mental reality in which our everyday consciousness has become entangled such as, for instance, the trappings of wealth and status. Maya must be overcome in order to attain Moksha, or salvation, achieved not through any external rites or pilgrimages but through an intense meditative path, through a deep cleansing of the doors of perception till one is attuned to Brahman, and therefore to the universe. This journey of overcoming Maya to become attuned with one’s own spiritual wealth is suggested by the title of Bhīma’s verse

collection itself. *Stuti Chintamoni* literally means “eulogy to the thought jewel,” a mythical wish-fulfilling stone described in Nagarjuna Buddhism, which was an influence on Bhīma’s thought. The Mani jewel was said to manifest whatever one desired, including treasures, clothing and food, while removing sickness and suffering. However, “Chintamoni” also describes the teachings and virtues of “the enlightened one,” the being who has reached Moksha and is able to reflect on all states of the subconscious mind, including the ones tied up with Maya, while not being defined or entrapped by either of them. Devotion to the enlightened Chintamoni, the being who possesses supreme knowledge of these states of mind, is the path to Moksha. Bhīma’s title, then, contains a play on metaphors of material as well as spiritual wealth, and as I demonstrate in my analysis, his message concerning both is one with radical implications for the society in which he lived.

Bhīma demonstrates his rational ability to understand his own desires in light of larger ideas about the world by pointing out that being blind to one’s immediate material circumstances, which represent Maya, is acceptable as long as one has the ability to see within oneself and acquire spiritual wealth. He therefore describes Maya using the metaphor of darkness: “There is no lamp/You keep the house dark.”¹²⁴ This is a radical point, one that turns Bhīma’s lamentable circumstances as a poor and possibly blind tribal into a strength, because it emphasizes that the value of a person should come from within, rather than from socially constructed hierarchies. It is a rationality, then, in line with Bhīma’s protest against social inequalities such as casteism and sexism. Bhīma therefore denigrates the rich and powerful who disregard the spiritual values he tries to impart:

¹²⁴ Bhīma in Satpathy, *Bhīma Bhoi, Prayers and Reflections*, 45.

Their minds are steeped in ignorance
And wicked are the high-born.
When I speak of you as without desire,
Oh Svami, they just twist their moustaches in pride.¹²⁵

The “high born,” or those born into a higher caste, are ‘wicked’ because ‘their minds are steeped in ignorance’ and false pride. Bhīma conveys their investment in the trappings of Maya by describing their ignorant pride in their moustaches, even though, according to spiritual rules, Brahmins are generally supposed to be clean-shaven.¹²⁶ Bhīma asserts instead that true material wealth is that which comes from spiritual devotion:

What you gave me is merely a glance.
Of compassion, grace and mercy.
I paid you back with my devotion and service.
What remains of my debt or its interest?¹²⁷

In this verse addressed to the divine, Bhīma measures material riches through spiritual metaphors such as “compassion, grace and mercy,” which he “pays back” not in monetary terms but through “devotion and service.” His use of fiscal metaphors conveys that the riches of spiritual enlightenment are much more valuable than financial rewards. He reinforces this point by ending with a question that challenges his listeners, asserting that there should be no question of “debt or interest” because “devotion and service” are

¹²⁵ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 127

¹²⁶ Bhīma had frequent conflict with the local ruling elite. Around 1862, the Kshatriya ruler of Rairakhhol imprisoned him; around 1891, the king of Sonapur, Niladhar Singh Deo, accused him of immoral practices and challenged Bhīma to prove his purity through an agnipariksha (a trial by fire.) The king’s death beforehand confirmed Bhīma’s sainthood for many. Satpathy, *Bhīma Bhoi, Prayers and Reflections*, 19-20.

¹²⁷ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 215.

more valuable than external signifiers of wealth. Bhīma, then, rationally distances himself from his immediate external circumstances to understand himself in relation to the larger spiritual truths he values.

The emphasis on valuing a person according to their inner being rather than the external trappings of Maya, such as material wealth and social status, is reinforced by the hagiographic legends that surround Bhīma's existence and which he actively propagated in his lifetime. According to one of these, "when Mahima Swami, Bhīma Bhoi's guru came to visit him, the blind Bhīma said, 'If you have come to bless me let me be able to see you.' And then he could see. He came out and saw the two seers standing outside like the 'Sun and Moon.' Mahima Swami blessed him with the intense power of poetic vision and said that he had a preordained role to play in the propagation of the tenets of the Mahima cult in this century. Bhīma prayed to him: 'O Lord, with the power of vision you gave me I have seen your divine feet but I don't want to see all the dirt in this world. Bless me that the outside world remains invisible to me.' The Swami blessed him saying: 'Let your inner eyes open and the external eyes close as before.' Bhīma again went blind."¹²⁸ Here, sight functions as a metaphor of enlightenment, and Bhīma stresses that true 'sight' does not require the functions of the physical body. These legends reinforce the point that Moksha can only be reached through a concentration on the inner self through intense meditation, rather than through a focus on the external self and the

¹²⁸ Bhīma's physical blindness can also be read as a metaphor for an enlightened inward gaze. Johannes Beltz, "Bhīma Bhoi: The Making of a Modern Saint," in *Hinduism in Public and Private*, ed. Anthony Copley, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 237-238.

requirements of the physical body. Only those who go down this path of spiritual self-awareness will be able to overcome Maya and become one with Brahman.

Since one must detach oneself from one's immediate context to achieve Moksha, in some of his other devotional songs (bhajans), Bhīma focuses on the inner world of the self, describing the physical landscape only to emphasize a shimmering landscape of the inner world.

There is no tree nor its roots
Yet its shadows lengthen
There are fruits without buds or flowers
The leaves expand without stalks
And he is reached through the path of actionlessness.¹²⁹

Here, Bhīma metaphorically displaces the immediate physical reality. 'There is no tree nor its roots, ...no buds or flowers, no stalks,' there are just the effects of these things on the internal world of the self. For Bhīma, a rich, spiritual state of being can yield the productive, meaningful aspects of life without the pleasant, yet ultimately unnecessary objects that produce them, such as stalks, buds, flowers and trees; the devotee can benefit from the true riches of the world while foregoing those that do not really matter. He can enjoy the welcoming shade that trees provide, although not the tree itself; he can satisfy his hunger with fruit from the tree but not smell the fragrance of the flowers that usually accompanies the fruit. The final sentence "and he is reached through the path of actionlessness" suggests that these images are metaphors for a flourishing inner state of mind, one that needs only "actionlessness," or the introspective journey of the mind, to achieve equivalents of sensual pleasures such as a flower's scent. Bhīma's "actionless"

¹²⁹ Bhīma in Sitakant Mahapatra, *Bhīma Bhoi*, (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1983), 57.

journey, then, enacts a self-aware quest to displace the self from Maya and connect it with larger spiritual truths attained through meditation.

Bhīma’s verses also enact another rational practice, that of being able to reflect on one’s own desires. As Harry Frankfurt argues, one form of rationality that makes one human is the ability to be self-aware and self-conscious about one’s own desires by tracing one’s own cognitive thought patterns. Bhīma’s complaints enact this cognitive rationality by separating those desires that are linked to Maya, from those that he feels deserve to be satisfied. He therefore rebukes himself for longing for wealth and status that is unreasonable or undeserved.

My heart always longs for tapasya
And to chant the One-lettered Name
Yet I am unable, entangled as I am
In many worldly desires.¹³⁰

Here, Bhīma rues himself for desiring the worldly desires that “entangle” him and distract him from his tapasya, and wishes to distance himself from these “sins” of longing: “Just as darkness cracks up when the Sun’s rays fall on it, similarly o’Lord cut away my sins with the sword of knowledge. Just as when the moon rises at night, light shines everywhere; similarly abolish the burden of my sin O Lord.”¹³¹ Once again, Bhīma uses the “sun” and “moon” metaphor of light displacing darkness. Yet, as before, the “sun” and the “moon” are not symbols of physical reality, but of Mahima Dharma’s gurus who will lead to inner light, inner knowledge and “abolish the burden of my sin.” Bhīma, then,

¹³⁰ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 105.

¹³¹ Bhīma in Mahapatra, *Bhīma Bhoi*, 71.

is self-consciously describing the objective, rational act of reflecting and evaluating his own desires for undeserved wealth or status, a process key to extricating oneself from Maya and achieving Moksha.

Importantly, however, while Bhīma is able to recognize which of his desires are unreasonable, in his enactment of cognitive rationality, he also recognizes the desires that are reasonable; in a radical point Bhīma asserts that he deserves to have his basic needs met. Thus he tempers his emphasis on the value of one's "inner self," that responsible for producing one's thoughts and actions, by stressing that being detached from the material world does not mean that he does not need any material comforts at all; while he refers to being caught up or entrapped in the illusion that is one's material reality in negative imagery, he also stresses that to escape from Maya, a "shelter" of some sort is needed:

Where shall I go?
Where shall I find a shelter?
I do not really know.
Unruly Maya assaults
Again and yet again.
How long shall I bear it?¹³²

"Shelter" works at both a literal and a metaphorical level here; at the metaphorical level it signifies the mental strength needed to conquer a Maya that is all encompassing and inescapable. Bhīma reinforces the overwhelming power of Maya through the verse form, which begins with a question and ends with one, and through the alliteration of the Maya's "assault" and "again and again." One of the central lines of the verse takes a

¹³² Bhīma in Satpathy, *Bhīma Bhoi, Prayers and Reflections*, 45.

break from the questioning and states “I do not really know,” capturing his hopelessness. However, “shelter” also works at the literal level; elsewhere, Bhīma makes the point that if one’s material wealth should derive from one’s inner state of mind, he and his fellow devotees should not be treated like dogs and consigned to poverty just because they are tribals (adivasis), or members of a lower caste.

I get easily neither food to eat
Nor clothes to wear.
My life is lowly, I am an outcaste.
I know not when I shall receive your grace.

You are the great Lord and Creator, yet all is in vain.
You have given me this body,
Yet my most basic needs you have not met.
What justice is this, Oh Lord?¹³³

In the Oriya original, “basic needs” refers to “manda,” the word for gruel. Bhīma, then, is not talking about his desire for the Lord to grace him with material wealth, a desire he dismisses as “sinful,” but simply asking for basic clothing and for enough food to eat, and that too of the minimal quality needed for him to survive. Asserting his basic rights, Bhīma demands “justice,” making the modern point that there are some things that deserve to be satisfied just by virtue of his humanity.¹³⁴

While asserting the innate dignity of himself as a human, or in the religious sense a soul that contains Brahman, as the reason he deserves his basic needs met, Bhīma

¹³³ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 123.

¹³⁴ Mahima Dharmi ascetics, then, did not wish to live in total detachment from the material world, wanting to be fed and clothed by local patrons who valued their spiritual message. Lidia Julianna Guzy, “Mahima Dharma Ascetics: A Case Study on Popular Ascetism and its Patronage Structure in Rural Orissa” in *Hinduism in Public and Private*, ed. Anthony Copley, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

simultaneously contends that he also deserves that which he works for.¹³⁵ In doing so, he makes a radical point, tying the value of an individual, and what they deserve, not to traditional notions of gender and caste bound identities that were static and inescapable, but to modern notions of identity that were tied to the value of the work they did. Bhīma outlines and links this rational and thoroughly modern idea to the Hindu notion of karma, the law that proclaims that one's past actions determine one's social status as well as the good or bad events in one's life. Bhīma writes:

What you have written I enjoy,
Following the unseen karma.
I fill my belly with a morsel of food
That I earn from daily toil.¹³⁶

Bhīma begins by referencing the widespread belief that karma is linked to fate; Brahman has “written” “unseen karma,” therefore determining a soul's fate without the soul being able to see its destiny, let alone change it. Bhīma, however, turns this on its head, transferring a theological point which generally refers to how actions in one's past life decide one's static and rigid caste identity in the next, to a modern notion of identity in which one can change one's current circumstances according to one's own actions in the present. Thus the karma Bhīma is referring to is not “unseen” after all; it is the result of

¹³⁵ Satya Mohanty makes a similar point in his analysis of the Oriya *Lakshmi Purana*. He argues that the goddess Lakshmi has an egalitarian vision in which the worth of an individual is determined by the individual's actions, duty and work rather than static caste hierarchies. Mohanty, “Alternative Modernities and Medieval Indian Literature: the Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* As Radical Pedagogy,” 5.

This idea is also expounded in the Mahabharata, translated by Sarala Das into the vernacular Oriya centuries before Bhīma was writing. The Mahabharata revolves around the question of who deserves the throne of Hastinapur, asking whether one earns one's lot based on one's actions or because of their place in the kinship, social or religious hierarchy.

¹³⁶ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 103.

carefully calculated rational action. Bhīma highlights the fact that he fills his belly with food that “I earn from daily toil.” The word “earn” reinforces the notion that the food he eats is directly the result of his actions.

Bhīma also enacts his rationality by self consciously recognizing the logical consistencies in his cognitive thought processes. His devotional verse expands his argument that the value of an individual not only comes from his inherent worth as a “soul” issued from Brahman, or in secular terms, just by virtue of being human, but also from his actions. He therefore traces the relationships between cause and effect to reinforce his point that identities are made according to one’s actions rather than being fixed and unconditional:

If the pandit or a poet does not study,
Knows not the auspicious and inauspicious times,
If he is without his almanac or chalk or betel-nut,
How can he understand virtue and vice?

If a yogi is mad for sense-objects
And cares not for yoga-sadhana,
If he has no faith in the practice of mind-and-breath,
How can he perform his tapasya?

If a Brahmin does not fulfill his ritual duties,
And follows not the Vedas, if he repeats no mantra,
If he does not practice the three times of prayer,
And offers oblations to the dead, then he is of no use.¹³⁷

Here, Bhīma explores the logical links between a person’s actions and the outcomes of those actions; if a yogi is mad for sensual objects, how can he perform his tapasya, or spiritual practice, since the very definition of tapasya is to detach oneself from the

¹³⁷ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 107.

pleasures of the senses? And if a Brahmin does not fulfill his ritual duties, he ‘is of no use’ as a Brahmin, since the very definition of Brahmin is to fulfill these rites. Apart from the logical consistency in these statements, they also make a radical social point. A Brahmin is not a Brahmin unless he does his duty, just as a pandit or a poet cannot understand virtue and vice if they do not study these things. There is no such thing as an identity that one is born with; identities are constructed through one’s actions. The radical corollary of this, then, is that Brahmins do not deserve their place at the top of the social hierarchy anymore than anyone else does. As the verse progresses, Bhīma uses his highlighting of the logical schemas of cause and effect to make increasingly controversial claims. Having prepared the rational grounds for fewer objections from fellow devotees and listeners by starting with the less subversive examples of the “poet,” “pandit,” and “yogi,” by the end, he is questioning the fixed nature of Brahmanic identity by the same logical sleight of hand. Indeed, he is so bold that by the last two verses, he is even challenging the unconditional right of Brahma to be called the creator, or Lord Visnu’s unconditional right to be lord of the universe:

If Brahma did not create
The body of three qualities,
And if he cares not for birth or destiny,
Then how can he be called the creator?

If Lord Visnu does not nourish the fifty-six crore creatures,
If he does not recognize the Self
And protect the Dharma,
Then his lordship is not justified.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 108.

Even the divine, then, are not spared Bhīma's radical rational practice. Thus Bhīma makes the point that identities are constructed, not random, and rely on one's actions. Furthermore they are not static but based on changing socio-political contexts that need to be questioned when they do not meet the needs of those who deserve better.

Secular Rationality? Tantra, Ritual & Deity worship in *Stuti Chintamani* & the *Bhajan-Mala*

This section examines how Bhīma's radical rationality, while positing a modern politics of social equality, also demonstrates that some pre-colonial Indian thinkers made marked secular distinctions between rational thought and mythic thought, (notably different from Enlightenment definitions of the secular), and that categories of the modern, such as the epistemological "secular rational" I defined earlier through Talal Asad, arose from indigenous epistemologies, before and during colonialism, relatively outside the influence of colonial epistemologies. In tracing these forms of rationality, this section argues that, often, epistemologically secular understandings, with their distinction between myth, magic and ritual ideas of the world from rational ideas of the world, were rooted in what European thought classified as 'religious' belief so that the secular arose from within "religion" itself.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ In making this argument I implicitly rely on the idea that religion, secularism as well as the binary created between them are discursive constructs. As Richard King and Talal Asad among others have shown, colonial epistemology categorized religion, deciding what was to fit into it, resulting in a considerably altered 'Hinduism' and Buddhism. When I argue that particular forms of religious and secular subjectivity are universals both in the West and the non-West, then, I am not referring to specific colonial and postcolonial religions, but validating the human characteristics of thinking and living in myth, magic and the sacred, as well as in secular modes.

Why is tracing secular understandings in Bhīma's poetry so important? Doing so implicitly questions the sharp Orientalist distinction between modern/philosophy/rational/the West, and pre-modern/mysticism/irrational/the non-West. It was this binary which Hindu nationalists such as Vivekananda set out to change when they asserted the inherent rational monism that was supposedly central to Hinduism. In doing so, however, they used the very Judeo-Christian frameworks they thought they were resisting, focusing on the glorification of the textual Vedas and Shastras, while denigrating the use of rituals, idol worship and mythology. Thus this section also asks whether it is possible to find rational states of mind in "religion" without obscuring those aspects, such as symbolic ritual and idol worship, that Western models of rationality would classify as irrational. I argue that Bhīma destabilizes colonial binaries but without whitewashing the bread and butter of Hindu religiosity, those supposedly 'irrational' aspects of religious life that the subaltern tribal groups of society thrived on, and which were central to their intellectual thought.

In the literary analysis which follows, I explore Bhīma's supposedly 'irrational' modes of worship through his "ulti bamsi," examining how his sadhana, which included the yogic practice of meditation, tantric symbolism, and the contemplation and worship of deities such as Krishna, was inseparable from his rational thought processes. In doing so, Bhīma differentiated states of living in myth, magic, and ritual that involved rational understandings of the world, from those that did not, therefore positing a secular rationality that distinguished between different forms of mystic religiosity and consciously validated marginalized forms of subaltern religiosity.

his practice of these forms of rationality, were inextricably linked to his radical politics of equality.

One reason why Bhīma's devotional verse may not have been recognized as being an assertion of rationality, is that it has been judged by foreign epistemic and aesthetic categories. For instance, unlike Occidental thinkers, Hindu aestheticians have not always accepted poetry as one of the fine arts. The Acharyas, or learned ones, did not even classify poetry as one among the 64 artistic skills (*chaunsath kalayen.*) Rather, poetry was seen as a "vidya," or form of knowledge and a way of philosophizing, while other forms of art were *upavidyas*. The form of Bhīma Bhoi's poetry, then, becomes doubly significant if seen as a vehicle through which he explored philosophical truths rather than simply an art form devoted to sensory pleasures. Indeed, Bhīma Bhoi's verses and *Bhajanas* (singing the glory of God through dialogue between mind (*mana*) and consciousness (*chaitanya*)) are suffused with wistful prayer and yearning for the spiritual uplift of human beings.

The poetic form of Bhīma Bhoi's devotional lyrics, then, rendered it a form of philosophy according to Orissan epistemic categories. In line with the importance of the message he wanted to convey within his poetry, Bhīma structured his verse with strict attention to form, with the number of his poems, stanzas and lines, written line by line in prose style, forming a repeated pattern; the manuscript of *Stuti Chintamani* contains 100 *bolis* (poems) with 40 lines in each. Every two lines make a stanza, with each *boli* containing exactly 20 stanzas, and each line containing exactly 20 letters. Bhīma's stringent attention to these numbers is evidenced by his noting of the exact number of stanzas so far composed after every 5 *bolis*. The whole book, he notes at the end, contains

Bhīma's Upside Down Language and the continuity between rational thought and 'irrational' practice

In my analysis of Bhīma Bhoi's rationality so far, I have emphasized his cognitive processes, drawing attention to his abandonment of ritual, idol worship, pilgrimages and the mode of the symbolic for intense cognitive introspection and meditation that articulated a radical politics of rational social equality. Bhīma defiantly declared his rejection of idol worship: "I do not bow to gods and goddesses, To idols of clay and stone. O Lord, In search of liberation, I meditate on You."¹⁴⁰ His poetry highlights the revolutionary nature of such ideas by drawing attention to the opposition he faced from those who fumed that "devotees of Mahima do not care for Vedic diktat...they have dumped in the nether world all the rites and rituals honored in the Vedas."¹⁴¹ However, Bhīma Bhoi's religion was just as much about tantric ritual, symbolism, mythology and icons, as it was about cognitive introspection. While Alekha was a metaphor for "truth" and the way to Alekha was to discover the all powerful, all pervading, formless and indescribable truth within oneself through rational thought processes, Bhīma also engaged with tantric ritual and with the saguna tradition, which contemplates a personal god with a form and attributes, intimate and accessible, full of compassion and mercy, come down to earth to save suffering beings.¹⁴² Bhīma's Ultimate Reality, then, was at once dual (made up of a God outside the self) and non dual, (or made up of a God within

¹⁴⁰ Bhīma in Satpathy, *Bhīma Bhoi, Prayers and Reflections*, 38.

¹⁴¹ Bhīma in Satpathy, *Bhīma Bhoi, Prayers and Reflections*, 140.

¹⁴² Tantra celebrates sexual experience by recognizing the deities Shiva and Shakti, or Purusha and Prakriti, soul and body, as the lingam and yoni, the masculine and feminine energies which create the universe in their sexual union, providing a dharmic path to Moksha.

oneself reached through thought and introspection.) Furthermore, he was reachable through true devotion that produced spiritual knowledge (bhakti yoga) as well as intellectual knowledge arising out of difficult reflection and introspection (gyan yoga.)

In light of all this, Bhīma Bhoi's religious thought seems far from being an articulation of the secular rational, a mode of knowledge that distinguishes between rational states of mythic, magical, and ritual being, and irrational ones. The seeming lack of this distinction also renders Bhīma's thought as full of logical inconsistencies and contradictions. However, a literary analysis of his poetry reveals that he was well aware of these contradictions. Indeed, he highlights them through his mystical sandhya bhasa, the *ulti bamsi*, literally the "upside down" language.

He is neither water nor wind.
He is not formless, yet has no form.
He is neither knowledge nor ignorance,
Nor even the conception of the Veda.¹⁴³

This is an intentionally paradoxical verse. In Nagarjuna Buddhist thought, which Bhīma drew on, water signifies cohesion, and wind, expansion. The two are, then, opposites. Similarly, in the verse, Brahman "has no form" that one can perceive, yet he is not formless. The verse structures itself around pairs of opposites: water/wind, formless/form, and knowledge/ignorance in its descriptions of Brahman, providing a logical conundrum. The only line that does not have an opposition at its centre is the last. Bhīma does not say that Brahman is the Veda, and simultaneously not, making the line a strong rejection of the Vedas as vehicles towards Brahman, especially given the

¹⁴³ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 181.

oppositions that structure the rest of the verse. The *ulti bamsi* reappears in another deliberately contradictory verse:

With waves control the water
In the pond without banks.
At the feet of the Formless of Infinite joy
You shall live forever bearing the brilliance of Brahman.
The river running upstream is full to the brim.¹⁴⁴

The lines in this verse are full of intentionally logically nonfunctional images. Far from controlling water as Bhīma writes, waves disrupt water. A “pond without banks” cannot be called a pond. Similarly the “formless” cannot have discernible feet because if it does, it must have form. With these paradoxes, Bhīma gestures towards a space beyond representation, that of the void that is Brahman. *Alekha Brahman*, after all, stands for the Absolute that cannot be defined, seen or described. If one grasps this, one can reach the void and “live forever bearing the brilliance of Brahman.” This is an internal process of meditation, evidenced by the last line. “The river running upstream is full to the brim” is an image frequently used by the Natha yogis and the *panchasakha*, which serves as a metaphor for “*ulata sadhana*,” or “upside down practice,” the regressive process of spiritual practice which flows against the currents of worldly existence.¹⁴⁵

However, I argue that Bhīma’s *ulti bamsi* posits these logically nonfunctional, paradoxical images in order to resolve them, in the process describing a *tapasya* that is a

¹⁴⁴ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 303.

¹⁴⁵ Acyutananda Das, one of the *Panchasakha* poets, uses a similar image in his *Brahma-Sankhali*. “Who is an embodied siddha, who has not gone against the current? Moving in the upstream direction the lake of mind is full.” Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 303.

secular practice, one which does make distinctions between rational understandings of the world and the irrational ones he denigrates. As I mention in my introduction, then, the indigenous literary device of *ulti bamsi* is continuous with Bhīma’s humanist assertion of subaltern logic. To this end, Bhīma’s *ulti bamsi* depicts a practice of overcoming opposites that posits a secular mode of ritual being in which rational thought and certain ritual practices are one, serving the same ends, and elaborating the same epistemes of rationality. In doing so, Bhīma elevates those symbolic and ritualistic practices that are one with his rational thought, above those that are not.

When you measure the measureless and eat the inedible,
The company of saints destroys past sins.
If you meditate on the unimaginable Brahman day and night,
The body is transformed anew.

If you can see the essence of the unseen,
You can recite the unuttered prayer.
Know the unknowable
And worship the formless.

If you want to cross over
Dive into the practice of nirveda.
True knowledge and the path of liberation
Are found at the doorstep of the Guru.¹⁴⁶

In these verses, Bhīma speaks of a knowledge beyond duality that contains an invitation to a practice of overcoming opposites so that their contradictions are dissolved.

Furthermore, the verses demonstrate that the process of overcoming opposites relies on the idea that, in some modes of religiosity, rational thought and ritual practice are one.

The first verse posits the idea that the practice of “measuring the measureless” and “eating the inedible” will produce the thought, or enact the spiritual process, in which the

¹⁴⁶ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 304-305.

“measureless,” or Alekha will become reachable or “measurable,” a process that will destroy past sins.” Similarly, meditations on the “unimaginable Brahmin,” will result in a practice that “transforms the body anew.” The final verse consolidates these ideas by suggesting that “the practice of nirveda,” a practice which denotes a bodily detachment from worldly objects, will produce thought, or the “true knowledge” that leads to the “path of liberation.” The *ulti bamsi* and the contradictions it contains, then, contains the seeds of its own resolution by suggesting the redefining of some modes of religious practice, such as the symbolic rituals of tantra, as being continuous with and inseparable from thought. While Western anthropology would categorize these practices as modes of symbolic “ritual,” Catherine Bell proposes that so-called ritual activities be removed from their isolated position as special, paradigmatic acts and be seen as culturally strategic ways of acting. She argues that seeing ritual activities as actions separate from thought, as people doing ritual and necessarily thinking something else, is logically nonfunctional. Instead, ritual is a mode of practice, and thus continuous with other modes of behavior within everyday life, including thought. Pierre Bourdieu suggests something similar when he writes that social agents operate according to an implicit practical logic and bodily dispositions, or “habitus,” which create meaning in the doing. One learns to think a certain way through bodily practice; the bodily practice produces the thought.¹⁴⁷ Bhīma’s creative transformation of language through the mystical *ulti bamsi*, then, ends up transcending all opposites in the same way that the devotee’s mind has to overcome the duality of Maya in order to achieve salvation, making the point that rational thought and ritual practice can be one. Ultimately, then, Bhīma’s cognitive introspection can be seen

¹⁴⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 54.

as a product of his practical sadhana rather than his sadhana being an out of place footnote to his rational pursuit of moksha in the way it was for Vivekananda.¹⁴⁸

If, then, we understand Bhīma's symbolic and mythological path to the divine through the body as producing his rational cognitive introspection, we can also explain some of Bhīma's supposed logical inconsistencies. For instance, he registers his hatred for the womb born gross body, or "sthula sharira" but simultaneously also reveals a seemingly unselfconscious affectionate concern for the well being of the material body; the idea that the body will not be afflicted by a process of decay if one takes refuge in Mahima dharma is reiterated throughout the text.¹⁴⁹ However, if one sees Bhīma's descriptions of the body as relating to different stages towards achieving moksha, they no longer seem contradictory. Instead the paradoxes describe how the physical process of the body becoming beautiful enacts and produces the spiritual process of drawing the self closer to God, and vice versa.

¹⁴⁸ This is also clear, for instance, in Bhīma's worship of Krishna through seeing himself as Radha reborn. Johannes Beltz, and Kedar Mishra, "Ascetic, Layman, or Rebellious Guru? Bhīma Bhoi and his Female Consorts," in *Popular religion and Ascetic Practices: New Studies on Mahima Dharma*, eds .Banerjee-Dube and J. Beltz, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2008). In this bhakti tradition, romantic love between human beings in the material world is seen as merely a diminished, illusionary reflection of the soul's original, ecstatic spiritual love for Krishna, an incarnation of Brahman. Thus the practice of romantic love enacts and therefore produces the spiritual union with Brahman that yields Moksha.

¹⁴⁹ The unenlightened body is often spoken of in the Sankhya terminology of sthula (gross) but Bhīma also refers to the suksma sharira (subtle body). Only the gross body "dies;" the subtle body survives as the product of the union of the Guru or Brahman with the shisya, or disciple, in Moksha. Bhīma writes: "Just as Flesh covers bones, so do, Guru and shisya envelope each other in the ocean of wisdom. Just as blood flows through flesh all over the body, so is the relation/ between Guru and shisya/ How can one separate the two?" The subtle body here functions as a tantric vehicle towards Moksha, becoming the metaphor for the union of the Guru and disciple.

May this body of mine shine like a mirror. May it dazzle like the lightning.
May the formless Brahman remain kind to me. May this form of mine
glow like burnished copper.

May this form of mine sparkle like gold; may it shine like the luminous
sun; may I remain firm, in my devotion to the revered Guru through the
ages.¹⁵⁰

Bhīma emphasizes the direct link between the physical process of bodily transformation and the spiritual progress towards Moksha, through a play on the word “firm.” Since the preceding line has been about the beautification of the body, “firm” is clearly a reference to a “firm” youthful body. Johannes Beltz, therefore, points out that the chanting of these verses was part of a ritual performance meant to heal the chanter; the thoughts evoked by the verse enacted the bodily practice of healing to the extent that Bhīma was credited with healing powers.¹⁵¹ However the line that follows: “in my devotion to the revered Guru” makes it apparent that Bhīma also means “firm” in devotion, or firm in his beliefs. The subtle body, then, *brings about* the enlightened state of Moksha and vice versa; Bhīma’s engagement with the symbolism of the body gives birth to an enlightened state of cognition that leads to Moksha. The co-existence of the sthula sharira and the subtle body, then, are not logically inconsistent and therefore not irrational; they are simply different steps on the way to Moksha.

Another seeming logical inconsistency in Bhīma’s thought is the coexistence of nirguna and saguna traditions of bhakti. The divine is simultaneously formless, reachable only through cognitive introspection, and a personal god incarnated in the form of

¹⁵⁰ Bhīma in Satpathy, *Bhīma Bhoi, Prayers and Reflections*, 52.

¹⁵¹ Johannes Beltz, Heiko Frese, Angelika Malinar (eds.) *Text and Context in the History, Literature and Religion of Orissa*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 169.

mythological deities. Thus his reality is at once dual, made up of a God outside the self, and non dual, or made up of a God within oneself reached through thought and introspection. Indeed, Bhīma often frames the tantric union of Prakriti with Purusha through the mythological union of two deities, in one verse, Radha (here Prakriti) and Krishna (here Brahman or Purusha.) “Your union with Prakriti/ Created the world./ From being nameless/You acquired a name;/ From being formless,/You took up a form/ Fondly, people call you Krishna – /The one who dances beneath the kadamba tree.”¹⁵²

However, these logical inconsistencies are similarly resolved through Bhīma’s understanding that once he has achieved the spiritual goal of reaching Moksha, he will achieve the physical goal of becoming an embodiment of the deity; he will give form to the formless. One contemplates the formless Brahman till one sees oneself merging with the divine, embodying the form of the formless. Bhīma writes, “Gurudev, my Lord is the Nirguna Purusa. I am the one who is saguna. May the Lord show me the path as I enter the woods.” The “woods” represent the deep, dark, thorny path involved in achieving the merging of the saguna with the nirguna. When achieved, however, the resulting union of the disciple with the divine is so natural and complete that the formless divine merges with the form of the disciple.

You will only understand the mystery of the body,
 As described in the scriptures, when you and your Guru are one.
 As milk and water are perfectly mixed,
 Moreso must you unite your minds.

¹⁵² Krishna is supposed to have conducted his ‘dance’ or love play in the Kadamba tree’s hospitable shade. The ‘rasa lila’ or ‘the dance of divine love,’ is considered one of the highest of Krishna’s pastimes because it results in the creation of the universe. Thus, while Bhīma Bhoi’s cognitive thought processes reject rituals and idols in favor of finding Brahman within oneself, he also acknowledges the existence of deities and idols through his tantric celebration of Krishna as an incarnation of Brahman.

Between who is Guru and who is disciple,
There is no difference at all.
The Lord and his devotee have but one body,
They eat their meals together.¹⁵³

The verses highlight the absolute inseparability of the Guru, who is the embodiment of the divine, and the Shisya, or devotee, after enlightenment has been achieved. There is “no difference,” they are of “one body,” and the form contains both disciple and guru so completely that when one carries out a bodily function of eating or drinking, the other does too. It is no longer the gross body sitting down to eat but the divine; once again, a spiritual practice results in a physical one. The seeming logical contradictions of the *ulti bamsi*, then, signal their own resolution by pointing towards the continuity of modes of symbolic practice, such as tantric rituals and bhakti yoga, with the spiritual, introspective process of drawing the self closer to God. In the process, this “holistic rationality” also emphasizes those rituals that produce the thought processes and *tapasya* that leads to Moksha, demonstrating that Bhīma *does* distinguish between the “infinite pilgrimages and rituals/ that lead up to the Lord” and those that will enable the devotee to reach spiritual enlightenment. Bhīma’s intentional twilight language, then, enacts a secularism that comes from within his religious practice itself, by describing a secular state of mind that distinguished between myth and ritual that was rational, and that which was not.

Bhīma Bhoi’s poetry, in asserting a contextually grounded theory of rational social equality, and a theory of secular rationalism in colonial India, produces a movement of popular resistance against exploitative social structures and lays the foundations for an indigenous alternative modernity. His verse aesthetic encourages one

¹⁵³ Bhīma in Beltz and Baumer, *Bhīma Bhoi: Verses from the Void*, 179.

to see that universalism does not have to mean that the exact same idea, rationality, for instance, gets instantiated in the same ways in all contexts; universalizing forms of rationality were appearing in pre-medieval literary languages like the *ulti bamsi*, very different from contemporaneous colonialist scientific epistemes, at the height of the colonial period. These were part of a modern knowledge revolution that valued a person's actions over their religious or social status. A general idea of rationality, this kind of universalism would argue, gets challenged and instantiated universally, albeit in different manifestations. It thus implicitly affirms that other epistemic frameworks, including those that emerge from marginalized cultural and religious spheres, were arising in response to colonialist knowledge systems that were imposed from above, such as Vivekananda's emulation of Enlightenment scientific rationality was. In some South Asian contexts, secular rationality arose from within religion itself and in the process challenged many of the binaries set up by the categories 'modern' and 'premodern.' Reading how Bhīma Bhoi articulates an indigenous rationality through the aesthetic form of his poetry enables us to decolonize indigenous thinkers, and give them back their ability to articulate their own identities. Furthermore their enacting of such reason is emancipatory because it encompasses a diverse set of theoretical practices emerging from and responding to colonial legacies while exposing the abuses of power inherent in them. The material they provide, if read as not being completely subsumed by the logic of colonizing Enlightenment Rationality as Vivekananda's was, enables us to change the terms of the conversation about modernity. It enables us to see a vast array of humanist local narratives from all corners of the world conflicting, intersecting and arising in response to one another, all contributing to modernities. More importantly though, because different

kinds of thinking are able to coexist with European thought rather than be dominated and humiliated by it, we are left with a way of thinking which renders all it uses, including that from Europe, universally marginal, fragmentary and unachieved. Universalizing humanist modernities are turned into a truly local and global legacy.

Chapter 3: “A Chief is a Chief Through Other People:” Modern Democratic Ideals in Zulu Poetry

In early nineteenth century Zululand, in colonial South Africa, the terrorized subjects of Shaka, the dictatorial warrior chief, protested in unison that when Shaka went on rampages to neighboring territories:

women who were with child gave birth easily;
The newly planted crops they left still short,
The seed they left amongst the maize-stalks.

This “praise poem” was a searing critique of Shaka’s authoritarian power; so inhumane were his military rampages that the “seeds” of future generations were ripped from wombs, and the “seeds” of the crops that would sustain them lay abandoned, unplanted.¹⁵⁴ In this chapter I argue that these praise poems, in describing Shaka’s destruction of food, fertility, and communal systems of food sharing, were also mourning the loss of a “traditional” political order that prized consensus based decision making between a chief and his subjects, enshrined in the popular proverb “a chief is a chief through other people.”

While my reading of Bhīma Bhoi’s devotional poetry demonstrated how universalizing assertions of rationality were “contextual” through being expressed in local intellectual languages and cultures that were part of a modern knowledge revolution, these Zulu proverbs and praise poems demonstrate that “modern” humanisms

¹⁵⁴ In 1820 – 1828, Shaka imposed the institution of kingship and army in Zululand, effectively becoming a dictator. All powers and functions now lay with the king and the army. I argue that 19th century praise poems reflect this change in their criticism of Shaka’s authoritarian power.

such as democratic ideals were contextually grounded in, and produced through, very specific material conditions. Thus, this chapter looks at how “unmodern” ontologies were undone by, and modern literary epistemologies produced and supported by, “modern” institutional structures. Zulu agricultural organization stressed the communal sharing of crops and cattle between a chief and his people, a system of food distribution that literally and symbolically buttressed a political system of democratic power sharing between a chief and his subjects. Zulu folk literatures therefore repeatedly approve of chiefs’ rule through metaphors to do with the sharing of crops and cattle, and critique authoritarian rulers by speaking of their destruction of communal food economies. Cattle and food functioned as metaphors of power,¹⁵⁵ and in praising those chiefs who shared their food, Zulu texts were also referring to how well chiefs extended their power to their subjects.

As I elaborate later, by “democratic” rule, I refer to the core idea of democracy as a form of political organization that aims at universal and equal control over matters that affect one’s interests. However, I focus on democracy not just as an institutionalized political system where people had a right to decide who ruled over them and the laws that governed them, but also as a *culture* of democracy, a pre-colonial “discursive institution”

¹⁵⁵ Cattle and food obtained from crops represented wealth, including the bride wealth or lobola that legalizes marriage. Cattle were also the food of libation, and the requirement of ritual sacrifice, with all family ceremonies being performed in the cattle fold. References to cattle pervade the praise poems, with the language containing literally hundreds of terms for cattle, distinguishing them minutely as to horns, colorings and markings. Cattle were considered so central to the cultural life of the Zulu nation that they even had praise names, and the owner of a favorite or beautiful beast would compose and recite praises in its honour. The centrality of cattle in the ritual economy meant that there were a lot of taboos relating to the cattle fold, cattle, and milk. Cattle were valuable as providers of meat and milk, which in the form of curdled milk (amasi) was the mainstay of the diet, together with maize (ummbila) and millet (amabele) and the nutritious tshwala beer (utshwala).

that involved being able to freely speak criticism of those chiefs who did not share power with their subjects or rule ethically.

Verses of poignant, mournful, and angry poems create and sustain such a “culture of democracy” throughout the period of Shaka’s rule. This is not surprising; Shaka was the ruler who, from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth, radically changed the political structure of Zululand from one of largely informal systems of consensual rule between a chief and his subjects, to a dictatorial kingship with its own army.¹⁵⁶ The kingship concentrated “all powers and functions in the king, and the army (now based on age sets rather than on territorial or tribal units) subordinated all affiliations to the national affiliation centered in the king. Shaka’s rule, then, replaced the values of reciprocity and diplomacy with the ideal of dominance, in which the values of forcefulness and fearlessness, martial power and national glory, played the most important part, together with the values of good order, respect for authority, and obedience to discipline.”¹⁵⁷ This radical shift in culture, however, did not go unchallenged. Praise poems, a traditional Zulu social institution based on communal chanting, sustained “a culture of democracy” that was uniquely placed to propound the popular Zulu proverb “a chief is a chief through other people.” I argue that praise poems did so by explicitly critiquing chiefly transgressions. As Liz Gunner and Mafika Pascal

¹⁵⁶ James Stuart, Anthony Trevor Cope, *Izibongo – Zulu Praise Poems*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 22.

¹⁵⁷ Stuart, Cope, *Izibongo – Zulu Praise Poems*, 22.

Gwala point out, praise poetry was “a broadly based poetic tradition widely practiced and widely circulating, not a tradition tied to the aristocratic and powerful.”¹⁵⁸

Praise poetry, and to a lesser extent izagu (proverbs) and riddles, safeguarded democratic cultures and exemplified “a chief is a chief through other people” in their cultural status, performance, content, and form. These oral texts had immense cultural status because they were considered sacred activities sanctioned by the ancestral spirits of Zulu tribe. The public sphere in which these texts belonged, then, was a sacred one that was outside the purview of even the most powerful chief. By extension, the communal recitation of praise poems, proverbs, and riddles was almost a form of prayer, a way of connecting to the ancestors.¹⁵⁹ Since, as I argue, these sacred literatures were a form of “democratic” behavior that supported shared government and communal institutions, these texts challenge scholarly binaries between “tradition” and “modernity” and the “religious” and secular;” just as Bhīma’s verse does, these praise poems testify to the existence of recognizably “secular” and “modern” behaviors and institutions in spheres usually regarded as “traditional” and “religious.”

¹⁵⁸ Elizabeth Gunner, Mafika Pascal Gwala, *Musho! Zulu Popular Praises*, (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1991).

¹⁵⁹ As Michael Chapman notes, the praise poet also took part in religious service, acting as a medium of communication between the ancestors and the living. Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*, (Scottsville: University of Natal Press, 1996), 53 – 63. Cope adds that “the praise poem plays its part in the religious sphere as it does in the political sphere, for just as it is in a sense a channel of communication between the people and the chief when he is alive, so it is certainly when he has passed on to the world of ancestral spirits. The only way to contact an ancestor is to recite his praises, usually at the same time that a beast is sacrificed. He hears, and directs attention to the needs of his descendants. The chief and his ancestors protect the interests of the tribe in the same way that the family ancestors watch over the welfare of the family.” Stuart, Cope, *Izibongo – Zulu Praise Poems*, 33.

These “religious” literatures safeguarded and produced democratic cultures in their performance. In being shouted out at communal gatherings in response to the audience’s calls to “Musho!” or “Speak Him!,” praises, for instance, had the ethical responsibility of being expressions of public opinion, providing an effective means of social control and literally speaking the chief into being as embodying the character traits he was attributed with. Although Trevor Cope contends that “the purpose of the praise is to present the chief as an object of admiration, and there is consequently a tendency to maximize praise and minimize criticism” I argue that the praise poems themselves do not bear this out; praise poetry functioned as a vehicle of criticism, defining the chief, in both positive and negative terms through the opinions of other people.¹⁶⁰

Finally, the formal elements of the praise poetry enacted this communal culture of democratic critique through repetition in various guises: metre (repeated rhythms), rhyme (repeated final syllables), alliteration (repeated consonant sounds), assonance (repeated vowel sounds), and parallelism (repeated statements of identical construction, with different words expressing the same idea). For instance, in parallelism, lines used different forms of repetition that while essentially saying the same thing gave the impression of a democratic multivocality; while stirring the emotions and imagination through rich description, such repetition produced a mingling of different vocal registers to present one unified consensus based meaning.

¹⁶⁰ For example, Trevor Cope notes that the Zulu chief Senzangakhona is praised for his beauty and criticized for his obstinacy. Similarly, Cetshwayo’s praiser expresses the anxiety and disapproval of his people when he warns him strongly not to provoke the white man of Natal. Stuart, Cope, *Izibongo – Zulu Praise Poems*, 31.

As I mention in my introduction, this literary analysis hopes to suggest ways of articulating convincing accounts of alternative modernities by turning to oft overlooked texts as valuable sources with which to rewrite colonial histories. My analysis of “alternative” indigenous modernities takes on board the “implicit view of theorists of alternative modernity that the crucial features of the concept of modernity can be disaggregated; they can even be recombined in a number of different ways, shaped by differences in sociocultural context.” As Mohanty elaborates, the existence of these modern values and ideas in socioeconomic systems very different from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European capitalism challenges scholars not only to trace the provenance of such values and ideas in non-European contexts but to examine the alternative institutions and cultural forms that supported them.¹⁶¹ In this vein, I identify the occurrence of “democratic” ideas and values in Zulu literatures. Zulu oral texts express shared understandings of “modern” democratic cultural values in the aesthetic form of praise poetry, very differently from the ways in which Occidental political theorists, from Aristotle to John Stuart Mill, were doing so. Significantly, I also identify the alternative institutional structures, including a communal agricultural system of food distribution linked to a political system of consensus based representational democracy, that buttressed these “democratic” values through discursive institutions such as praise poetry.

My analysis of democratic cultures in nineteenth century Zulu literatures first explores the communal institutions of food sharing that enacted the popular Zulu proverb

¹⁶¹ See the introduction of the forthcoming volume Satya P. Mohanty (ed.), *Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature: A View from India*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

“a person is a person through other people.” I then demonstrate how these ideas of interdependence extended to the political sphere in the form of the proverb “a chief is a chief through other people” so that the communal system of food sharing also functioned as a metaphor for systems of sharing political power. Finally, I demonstrate how the “parallelist” verse aesthetic in praise poetry expounds and enacts a democratic multivocality that prizes universal political participation but, unlike Western systems of democracy, emphasizes consensus based rather than majoritarian decision making.

The Democratic Institution of Sharing of Food and Cattle in pre-colonial Zululand

In this section, I first explore the communal behavior of food sharing that enacted the popular Zulu proverb “a person is a person through other people” because, as I elaborate later, Zulu democratic values were linked to these behaviors. This confirms political theorist Barnard Crick’s point that talking about “democracy” involves talking not just about a “principle or doctrine of government,” but of a set of institutional arrangements” and even of “a type of behavior (say the antithesis of both deference and of unsociability.)”¹⁶² My analysis of Zulu oral texts suggests “democracy” as a form of government (communal participation in meetings with chiefs regarding important political decisions) was indeed inextricably linked to a set of institutional arrangements, including a communal system of food sharing centered in the chief. Democracy as a form of government was also linked with “a type of behavior,” represented in oral texts, that emphasized interdependence and generosity when it came to food and crops, and was irreverent and critical towards chiefs that did not behave in this manner.

¹⁶² Bernard Crick, *Democracy – A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 5.

As multivocal “discursive institutions” such as praise poetry, riddles, and proverbs testify, the democratic behaviors of interdependence, reciprocity, and generosity surrounding food and agriculture were central to the ethical and political framework of the Zulus; the Bantu speaking people were traditionally agriculturists and, as South African literary scholar Michael Chapman points out, in binding the living to the ancestral dead, land, and the cattle and crops it produced, provided both physical and sacred roots of existence. The sharing of the fruits of the land therefore served as the basis of the economy but was also an ethical imperative, without which the ancestors could not be happy. As a result, there are countless customs surrounding the concept of “a person is a person through other people” that deal with the giving and taking of food. For instance, the word *ukuthekela* referred to the sharing of one’s crops, *ukunana* referred to the sharing of one’s household items, and *ukusisa* referred to the lending of one’s female livestock to a neighbour till it gave birth to calves, which the neighbour would keep, only returning the cow. These systematic institutions of sharing were expressed through Zulu proverbs, *izagu*, such as “they eat through other men,” which refers to the practice of helping a man to slaughter and skin his beast, and then sharing the meat with him. The idea of sharing food was also captured by proverbs that deal with giving food, particularly to strangers. For instance, phrases such as “the stomach of a stranger is small;” “the stomach of a traveler does not finish anything;” “the mouth does not despise” and “a beast that is passing finishes no grass” were usually recited by strangers at one’s door asking for a bite to eat, with the tradition being to ply such strangers with food. One reason for this generosity was the custom of reciprocity expressed by proverbs such as “Let the meat gifts cross one another” and “To give is to dish out for oneself

(ukuph' ukuziphakela).” Giving to another, then, metaphorically translated into giving to the self, realizing the idea central to the popular South African notion of *ubuntu* that “a person is a person through other people.”¹⁶³ Giving to another was also considered canny because the expectation was that the same person or their tribe would be able to look after you in return if you traveled their way. The characteristic of not sharing food, meanwhile, was heartily criticized, with *izagu* speaking of such people as displaying *ubuqili* or cunning, as in the proverb “he is the crafty one whose locusts are roasted last.” This proverb, referring to the practice of boys roasting and sharing their locusts over a communal fire, highlights the last roaster as being keen to benefit from the efforts of others while being reluctant to share his own food.¹⁶⁴

The ideas of interdependence and reciprocity through sharing food also extended to concepts of social organization and property ownership. One nineteenth century riddle describes the layout of a Zulu village through the metaphor of a pumpkin plant, which was a staple crop in Zulu farming:

Guess ye a pumpkin-plant; it is single, and has many
branches; it may be hundreds; it bears many thousand
pumpkins on its branches; if you follow the branches, you
will find a pumpkin everywhere; you will find pumpkins
every where. You cannot count the pumpkins of one
branch; you can never die of famine; you can go plucking
and eating; and you will not carry food for your journey

¹⁶³ For the connection between ubuntu’s “a person is a person through other people” and “a chief is a chief through other people” see my published article: Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, “Ubuntu Sports Inc.: The Commodification of Culture in South African and American Sports,” *Safundi* 12.1, (January 2011).

¹⁶⁴ C.L. Sibusiso Nyembezi’s 1963 book, *Zulu Proverbs*, has a whole section on proverbs about ubuntu. See C.L. Sibusiso Nyembezi, *Zulu Proverbs*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1963).

through being afraid that you will find no food where you are going. No; you can eat and leave, knowing that by following the branches you will continually find another pumpkin in front; and so it comes to pass. Its branches spread out over the whole country, but the plant is one, from which springs many branches. And each man pursues his own branch, and all pluck pumpkins from the branches.¹⁶⁵

The riddle depicts the pumpkin plant as a village and the pumpkins as its individual homesteads to echo “a person is a person through other people.” The parallelism of the phrase, “you will find a pumpkin everywhere; you will find pumpkins everywhere,” with the repetition only distinguished by the pluralization of “pumpkin” to “pumpkins,” asserts that a single pumpkin found “everywhere” is the same as, or connected to, the many pumpkins found everywhere. One pumpkin is linked to many; therefore one is many, just as a person is a person only because she belongs to a community of many; the singular is only possible through the existence of the plural, and vice versa. Furthermore, in representing the village as a unified whole made up of many homesteads, just as a pumpkin plant is “one from which springs many branches,” the riddle also makes an important point about the nature of private property. While each man pursues “his own branch,” or his own village street, this individual ownership is immediately negated by the pluralization of the individual to “all” men, of “branch” to “branches” and of “pumpkin” to “pumpkins.” The individual, then, is inextricable from the community, and

¹⁶⁵ Reverend Henry Callaway, *Nursery Tales, Traditions, and Histories of the Zulus*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1970), 364.

Henry Callaway (1817-1890) was a missionary for the Church of England and a bishop of St. John's, Kaffraria, in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa (now the Anglican Church of Southern Africa) In collecting these Zulu language sources he clarifies that he transcribed the exact spoken word as it was told to him. He writes that “my object has been to give idiom for idiom rather than word for word, and at the same time, to preserve, as far as possible, the characteristic peculiarities of the original.” See Callaway, *Nursery Tales, Traditions, and Histories of the Zulus*. Thanks to Khwezi Mkhize for help with verifying translations.

so his branch and pumpkin are inextricable from the branches and pumpkins of the rest of the village. The syntax indicates that there is no such thing as individual possession. The point is consolidated by the assertion that, since the pumpkins belong to everybody, the traveler does not have to carry his own food, a significant point for it refers to the practice of sharing food so central to the social organization of the Zulu homestead.

The Democratic Sharing of Chiefly Power Through the Institutional Distribution of Food and Cattle

Not only was “a person is a person through other people” about a behavioral generosity characterized by the sharing of food and cattle between subjects but also about an organized sharing of food between a chief and his subjects, the “set of democratic institutional arrangements” that Crick refers to; the chief of the village was also the guardian of the communal economy, regulating the way food and cattle circulated to his subjects. As the link to the ancestors, the chief partook in rituals such as the First-fruit Ceremony that infused the harvest with ancestral blessings. Only after he had done so, was the harvest filtered down through the various levels of authority, to tribal chiefs, sub-chiefs and head-men, and eventually the common farmer and his family. As the guardian of the ancestor’s wishes, a chief who did not fulfill his ethical imperative of ensuring the material prosperity and well being of his subjects through the sharing of cattle, milk and harvest was not worthy of rule. The communal economy, then, worked through the chief who collected these items from his subjects and then distributed them. This was done without the chief formally “owning” any of the items he collected, thereby negating any conception of “private property.” In depending on the goods he received from his people,

the organization of the communal food economy effectively literalized the maxim “a chief is a chief through other people.”

I argue that Zulu “principles or doctrines” of government¹⁶⁶ grew out of just such a communal system of food and cattle sharing. This responsibility of sharing food and cattle was also political because it metonymically represented the sharing of power with the chief’s subjects. As Michael Chapman has shown, this sharing of power was an extension of the practical system of sharing government,¹⁶⁷ the system of traditional democratic monarchy was conducted by discussion in public meetings open to all adult males, where any man could express criticism of the chief’s behavior, and this system was buttressed through the ritual distribution of cattle, food and milk. Paul J. Bjerck, a historian of the Zulu kingdom, argues that because the king’s cattle were collected from every homestead in the realm, the king “bound the strength of the entire kingdom unto himself, centralizing and controlling its power.”¹⁶⁸ He then distributed this concentration of power by sharing land and cattle among his subjects, literally letting his warriors drink from the udders of his cows in a controlled manner. Food, then, and milk, in particular, was also a metaphor for power and the king’s fitness to rule was judged according to how readily he shared his milk and cattle, and therefore his power, with his subjects. Bjerck quotes one of James Stuart’s informants, Magojela ka Mfanawendhlela, who discussed the eating habits of the chiefly rivals Zungu and Makoba to determine which one should

¹⁶⁶ Crick, *Democracy – A Very Short Introduction*, 5.

¹⁶⁷ Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*.

¹⁶⁸ Paul J Bjerck, “They Poured Themselves into the Milk: Zulu Political Philosophy Under Shaka,” *Journal of African History*, 47 (2006): 1–19.

accede to the throne.¹⁶⁹ He notes that since Makoba ate up everything he was given, whereas Zungu would only take one mouthful and let the rest fall through his hands, Makoba was a glutton and would be mean, whereas Zungu would be content with a little and leave some for others; hence it was right he should become the chief despite Makoba's seniority.

Similarly, izagu and riddles also connect the ideas of interdependence that produced a communal food economy to ideas of a chief's function as the sustainer of his tribe. One riddle, for instance, puts forth this message through a metaphoric description of the chief as the eye of his tribe:

Guess ye a man who makes himself a chief; who does not work but just sits still; his people work alone, but he does nothing; he shows them what they wish, but he does nothing; his people do not see, he sees for them, they are blind, the whole of his nation; he alone can see. They know that though they cannot see; they see by him; for they do not go without anything they want; he takes them by the hand, and leads them to where there is food, and they return with it to their homes; but he touches nothing, for he makes himself a chief; he remains a chief for ever, for his people are supported by him... At first there was a dispute, and his people said, "You cannot be our king and do nothing; we cannot see the power of your majesty." He answered them, saying, "Since you say I am not a chief, I will just sit still, and look on the ground. Then you will see that I am truly a chief, for if I look on the ground the land will be desolate; you will fall over precipices and into pits; you will be eaten by wild beasts through not seeing them; and die

¹⁶⁹ James Stuart was born of British parentage in Pietermaritzburg and learned Zulu from Zulu children. As a civil servant and magistrate in various districts of Zululand between 1888 and 1912, he made an intensive study of Zulu customs, history and oral tradition, obtaining verbatim reports from a great number of old Zulu men some of whom had served under Dingana. The latter reigned from 1828, when he wrested the Zulu kingship from his half brother Shaka, to 1840 when he was displaced by his own half brother Mpande. Among the numerous praise poems recited to Stuart by practicing praise poets in the early years of this century were the memorial praises of Shaka and Dingana.

through famine, being unable to find food; because you dispute with me, you are blind.”¹⁷⁰

The riddle begins by building up the uselessness of the chief, reflecting what may have been a popular criticism of a chief’s power, that he “does nothing.” Indeed, the riddle uses repetition to reinforce this notion, noting that the chief “does not work,” “he does nothing.” However, the riddle then goes on to note, without altering the structure of the sentence or the syntax and therefore effectively replacing the previous negative statements, that the chief “sees” for his subjects. This “seeing,” furthermore, is directly linked to the chief making sure that “they do not go without anything they want; he takes them by the hand, and leads them to where there is food, and they return with it to their homes.” Significantly, the riddle highlights that the chief “touches nothing” himself. Nothing belongs to him. Perhaps most importantly, the riddle stresses that the chief ‘makes himself the chief’ through these actions. He “remains a chief for ever, for his people are supported by him.” The direct causality in this sentence makes a radical statement. The “chief is only a chief through other people;” he does not inherently own his power, but earns it through the effective performance of his duty, and it is only these actions which make him ‘truly’ a chief.

The Democratic Critique of Chiefs through Praise Poems

Praise poems took these critiques even further. These oral texts were forms of history that recalled important historical characters and described contemporaries in specific turns of phrases and “praises” that had been passed down over generations. Praise poetry therefore exemplified “a chief is a chief through other people” in its

¹⁷⁰ Callaway, *Nursery Tales, Traditions, and Histories of the Zulus*, 366.

function as a link to the common origins of the clan; the izibongo, or personal name with which one was identified, was also the name of one's clan. In being praised with their clan name by the people in one's tribe, the Zulu subject metaphorically became that person, carrying all the historical resonances associated with the name and giving explicit meaning to the idea that "a person is a person through other people." As the literary scholar of praise poetry, Liz Gunner, has shown, the same clan name was used to praise chiefs, stressing continuity and origin rather than personal status.¹⁷¹

Praise poems were also particularly effective in their expression of cultural democracy because in their aesthetic forms they created a space of communal orality that depended on interactions between speakers and listeners, and that harnessed movements of popular resistance to authoritarian rule.¹⁷² The praise poet, for instance, functioned as the intermediary between the chief and his subjects, for, when he presented the chief to the people in his recitation, he also represented the opinion of the people to the chief. As South African literary scholar Trevor Cope points out, the special position of the praiser enabled him to criticize with impunity certain aspects of the chief's personality or actions, either by overt criticism or covertly by the omission of praise. The effectiveness of these poems in sanctioning democratic cultures was primarily due to their communal

¹⁷¹ In her translations of praise poetry, Liz Gunner notes that the izithakazelo, clan praises, which are closely related to praise poetry both linguistically and in their gestural significance stress the common origins of those from a particular clan rather than any other kind of hierarchy. Thus everyone who has the clan name Zulu has the right to be greeted by one of the clan names, Ndabezitha! Anyone with the clan name Mhongo has a claim to the salutation: Njomane son of Mghabe who was a prodigal for years but was seen again in the fourth year! See Gunner, Gwala, *Musho! Zulu Popular Praises*.

¹⁷² It was not till the middle of the 19th century that Zulu was reduced to writing by missionaries, bringing with it a different mode of knowledge and literacy that relied on individual transfers of information. Praise poetry remained a popular oral form even then.

recitation; they acted not just as an incentive and reward for socially approved actions but a reminder to all present what qualities and conduct are praiseworthy. Characteristics of the recital therefore aimed to make it an important occasion in which the entire community took part. The praiser, or imbongi, wore a fantastic costume of furs, feathers and animal tails, reciting the praises at the top of his voice and as fast as possible. The high pitch, loudness, and fastness, aimed to create an emotional excitement in the audience as well as in the praiser himself, whose movement became increasingly exaggerated. Liz Gunner notes that it was a dramatic performance of suiting actions to words, producing an effect of seriousness and occasion. Furthermore, in its elimination of any downdrift intonation, praise poetry gave the impression of never ending and of always being open to further additions, so that the subject of the poem was always aware that criticisms could be added to his praises, and that he would continually be held to account for his actions. Indeed, while the imbongi crafted the praises, anyone could recite them so that voices of criticism and praise were not limited to a select few.

Praise poetry devoted to particular chiefs, collected by the Zulu linguist and colonial official, James Stuart, in the nineteenth century make radical and evaluative public judgments about a chief's "democratic" tendencies by commenting on their egalitarian management of the communal food economy. For instance, the izibongo describes the chief Senzangakhona as someone:

who chewed with his mouth without eating
He who removed me from below and I went up above
I returned with yellow corn and threshed and cooked.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 80.

The imbongi characterizes Senzangakhona as chewing but not eating, suggesting that he controlled his own intake so as to enable others to eat. He is therefore described as “removing” the subject “from below,” a phrase that suggests the lower echelons of the tribal hierarchy, so that the subject could find yellow corn to thresh, cook and eat. Another chief, Khondlo of the Qwabe Clan, meanwhile, was so concerned about the well being of his subjects that he is praised as food himself:

Black millet that is eaten raw,
They ate it as it showed on the dry maize stalks.¹⁷⁴

Black millet is nutritious and does not have to be processed before it can be eaten. In describing Khondlo in these terms, the izibongo notes that Khondlo nourished and sustained the tribe while also highlighting Khondlo’s willingness to sacrifice himself for the wellbeing of his subjects. The last line praises Khondlo for making the consumption of food so easy that his subjects could eat the crop as soon as it appeared on the plants.

However, metaphors of eating and drinking did not only serve as literal praises but as negative criticism as well. A chief Dingane was described in his praise poem as “the milk bucket which overflows (gaba) without having given birth.”¹⁷⁵ This was a vivid praise, as well as a criticism, of the king’s authoritarian power because it suggested that milk, which served as a staple source of nourishment as well as a metaphor for power, had not been distributed to subjects, impeding their livelihood and ability to rule

¹⁷⁴ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 140.

¹⁷⁵ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 140.

themselves.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, the chief Jama was also criticized for his greed through the metaphor of chewing: “He who chewed with his mouth when he had nothing to chew, As if he were the son of Chewer of the Scrapers Clean.”¹⁷⁷ Another chief was criticized as the “miserly one who ate up the lobola cattle,”¹⁷⁸ a significant praise because lobola cattle were not meant to be eaten; they carried symbolic significance as the animals given by the bridegroom to the bride’s family at the time of marriage, and were to be returned if the marriage was to fail for any reason. By eating up the lobola cattle, then, this chief was tearing apart the very social fabric of his tribe. Chiefs were also criticized for living at the expense of his subjects without providing anything in return. For instance, the chief Zihlandlo was described as “the lazy one who has eaten the corn of the diligent ones.”¹⁷⁹ The poet adds Chief Zihlandlo’s words that “I can never be rich in crops and in cattle, And also be rich in people,” thus highlighting the chief’s wish to acquire as many crops and cattle as he could regardless of how much popular support he lost.¹⁸⁰

The most consistently negative praises, however, were reserved for Shaka who was not seen as fulfilling his chiefly duty of providing for his subjects. The imbongi echoes these sentiments in other parts of the izibongo when he describes Shaka as a beast

¹⁷⁶ Bjerk notes that this concept of the flow of power throughout the society in transfers of milk is carried in the metaphors of social interaction, especially state action. See Bjerk, “They Poured Themselves into the Milk: Zulu Political Philosophy Under Shaka.”

¹⁷⁷ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 140.

¹⁷⁸ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 140.

¹⁷⁹ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 114.

¹⁸⁰ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 114.

who does not let himself be milked, not only denying sustenance and nourishment to his subjects, but also denying them the ritual sharing of milk that symbolized the sharing of power and, by extension, not letting them have any part in ruling the kingdom. A verse therefore exclaims:

Powerful limbs, calf of a beast,
The kicking of this beast puzzled me,
It kicked the milker and left the one holding it.¹⁸¹

As Paul J Bjerk notes, the king's own unique royal status was maintained by reserving the best young warriors and the best milk, for royal consumption – and they, as the distilled essence of the Zulu state, then nursed him. The state, in a ritual sense, was the king's mother – evoking an intimate relationship of mutual obligation between the king and the homestead heads, i.e. the citizens of the Zulu state. In turn, once the king had collected heifers, he “became mother to countless warriors who suckled at his teats.”¹⁸² Since the sharing of cattle and milk symbolized the sharing of power, giving the king cattle symbolized the people giving the chief his power, giving literal truth to the proverb “the chief is a chief through other people.” However, in “kicking the milker,” Shaka was described as collecting subjects' cattle and enjoying the benefits of rule, without sharing any of the power that they gave him. The *imbongi* stresses this idea in other verses too:

Help me Maphtitha and Ngqengelele,
And give him a cow that he may learn to milk into the mouth,
And give him a sharpened stick so that he may dig for himself.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 98.

¹⁸² Bjerk, “They Poured Themselves into the Milk: Zulu Political Philosophy Under Shaka,” 6.

¹⁸³ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 106.

Milking into the mouth describes the ritual whereby the king's subjects drank directly from the king's udders (those of his prize heifers,) thereby symbolizing their right to the king's cattle, and subsequently a share in his power. In noting that Shaka needs to "learn to milk into the mouth" the imbongi, therefore, criticizes Shaka's authoritarian rule.

As in the criticisms of other chiefs, however, the imbongi also disparagingly notes that Shaka lives off his subjects, both literally in eating the food and goods they provide, and metaphorically in not sharing the power they give him. The imbongi therefore sums up the nature of Shaka's totalitarian power through praises such as "leopard that prevents the other leopards at the fords."¹⁸⁴ This is significant because fords, along with other features of the land, were not seen as belonging to any one person, but to the community as a whole. In "preventing other leopards at the fords" Shaka had usurped what was not rightfully his. Thus, many poems criticize Shaka for living at other people's expense. The imbongi describes Shaka as the:

Lazy one that eats the corn of the diligent ones.
He who clears the ground with spears where chiefs use hoes;
He summoned an army from Menwiza saying it should gather the corn
before it is ripe.¹⁸⁵

This verse notes Shaka's destruction of the crop in combination with a description of him living off other people and not doing any work himself. His capacity for annihilation, then, is two fold and unique in its damage; the imbongi stresses that Shaka does not do

¹⁸⁴ The praise poems are embedded in Zulu social life, reflecting the landscape. There are frequent references to rivers (imifulu), mountains (izintaba), forests (amahlati) and ridges (izinkalo). The rivers are sometimes wide and deep, with the result that the fords assume strategic importance.

¹⁸⁵ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 114.

his duty like other chiefs. Instead, Shaka is “he who clears the ground with spears where chiefs use hoes.” Since Shaka does not “hoe” the ground to provide his people with sustenance, he is like “gruel made of inedible millet.” Furthermore, Shake “clears the ground with spears,” a reference to his many military rampages. Much praise poetry devoted to Shaka, then, in focusing on the havoc he wreaked in neighboring territories, highlighted his destruction of local food economies and sustainable consumption.

The imbongi criticizes Shaka for his unwillingness to produce systems of sustainable consumption for the Zulu nation, stressing that instead Shaka was interested only in holding on to power, even at the expense of other people. The imbongi therefore notes his destructive characteristics metaphorized by voraciousness. Indeed, a lot of Shaka’s praises concentrate on his penchant for murder and destruction through metaphors of consumption.

He who while devouring some devoured others,
And as he devoured others he devoured some more
He who while devouring some devoured others,
And as he devoured others he devoured some more
He who while devouring some devoured others,
And as he devoured others he devoured some more
He who while devouring some devoured others,
And as he devoured others he devoured some more¹⁸⁶

The verse stresses Shaka’s insatiable appetite for power through endless repetition that would have been recited breathlessly without pause and without any downdrift intonation. In doing so the imbongi gives the impression that Shaka eats, or kills, without stopping.

¹⁸⁶ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 96.

Praise poems also describe these violent expeditions through eating metaphors depicting his ravenous greed, and his killing for the sheer enjoyment of it:

He ate up Mantondo son of Tayi,
He felt him tasteless and spat him out,
He devoured Sihayo.¹⁸⁷

Not only does Shaka “devour,” a word that suggests wild voraciousness, he also wants his prey to taste good; he wants to enjoy his “eating.” His actions are so horrific that the imbongi highlights them through a narrative intervention in his own point of view, chanting,

I criticized them, the evil-doers,
The cattle of Sihayo returned
And then there followed those of Mangosi
That were milked by a hysterical person at Mavela’s place.¹⁸⁸

The verse describes Shaka’s and Mepho’s (a Mkhize chief who flourished as a favorite of Shaka) “evil” effect on the communal food economy through their murder of neighboring chiefs, Sihayo and Mangosi. The imbongi presents a dramatic visual scene of the cattle, the most prized possessions of the Zulu homestead, returning to the kraal without anyone guiding them. He emphasizes the pathos of this even further by noting that they were milked by a person made “hysterical” by Shaka’s crimes. The word “hysterical” supplants any specific description of Shaka’s doings, leaving these up to the listener’s imagination and memories, and therefore giving them even more terrible force. The verse

¹⁸⁷ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 98.

¹⁸⁸ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 112-114.

simply suggests that Shaka's effects on people were so horrific that they were rendered incapable of providing for themselves.

So devastating were these expeditions to the lives of subjects, that the imbongi includes a veiled threat in his verse. In doing so, he highlights the kinds of actions that his listeners, Shaka's own subjects, could take against him. Warning against the dangers of cattle raiding, the imbongi exclaims:

The people's cattle, Shaka, leave them alone, they are a cause of disaster, they tie sharp knives on to their tails.¹⁸⁹

The description "they tie sharp knives on to their tails" demonstrates how significant the cattle are to the local food economy. Stealing them is risking death. Remarkably, then, this poem contains the seeds of a democratic revolution against Shaka if he continues his destruction of the communal food economy and the democratic political process it was meant to buttress.

Enacting and Buttressing Consensus Based Democratic Government through Parallelist Praise Poems

Praise poems, then, described and sustained reciprocal generosity of "behavior" that enabled the "institution" of a communal food economy. This democratic institution, in turn, buttressed a democratic political system. When I talk about the Zulu political system of government as a democratic one, I refer to the core idea of democracy as a form of political organization that aims at universal and equal control over matters that

¹⁸⁹ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 62

affect one's interests. As I lay out in Chapter One, this core universalist idea is manifested in context specific permutations. For instance, in a representative democracy, the political system in much of the Western world, every vote must have equal weight, no restrictions can apply to anyone wanting to become a representative, and the freedom of its citizens is secured by legitimized rights and liberties which are generally protected. I argue that, while Zulu democracies traditionally also aimed at universal and equal control over matters that affected one's interests, decisions were reached not according to majoritarian voting but through consensus. As Thaddeus Metz points out, African cultures often consider it immoral to make policy decisions in the face of dissent, as opposed to seeking consensus. In the political realm, unanimity is prized, and majoritarianism is typically seen as a morally inadequate way to resolve conflicts of interest or to determine law. Thus, in many small-scale African communities, discussion continues until a compromise is found and all in the discussion agree with the outcome.¹⁹⁰ The Zulu political sphere traditionally contained similar spaces of consensus based dissent and decision making; the system of traditional democratic monarchy was conducted by discussion in public meetings open to all adult males, where any man could express his opinions about an issue until a decision was reached.¹⁹¹ These are clearly

¹⁹⁰ Thaddeus Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," 321–341.

¹⁹¹ Kwasi Wiredu describes a modern version of such a "non-party polity" among the Akan people in Ghana. This is a type of democratic system in which a candidate who wins a majority of votes would not aim to promote his constituency's interests, but would rather share power with other representatives by seeking consensus with them in the adoption of every government policy. This is, then, a fascinating and under-explored model of representative democracy quite different from the winner-take-all system in the United States and the parliamentary systems in Europe. See Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997).

For an anthropological overview of traditional African politics and the role of consensus in it, see the classic text, Meyer Fortes and Edward Evans-Pritchard, *African Political Systems* (London:

political principles found in a representative democracy, but are nevertheless different in their contextual specificities from how we would describe “democracy” in the Euro-American political tradition, reflecting local intellectual cultures and sensibilities. It is, then, a “contextual universalism.”

Through my reading of praise poetry, I argue that the Zulu political system before Shaka prized as broad a range of opinions as possible, and in my reading of Shaka’s praise poems I argue that discursive institutions struggled to keep the spirit of this multivocality alive despite his authoritarian rule. Furthermore, as I assert in my introduction and demonstrate through an analysis of Bhīma’s logical, upside down language, these subaltern literary devices were continuous with their socially progressive messages. Much praise poetry represents and enacts this system of consensus based representative democracy through a particular form of repetition. Parallelism consisted of lines of repeated statements of identical construction but with slightly different words and synonyms expressing the same idea. This gave the impression of a democratic multivocality; while stirring the emotions and imagination through rich description, such repetition produced a mingling of different vocal registers to present one unified meaning, just as a consensus based democratic system allowed all voices to be heard before reaching a common decision. Parallelism, then, added a contrapuntal quality to praise chants, containing two or more voices independent in their specific nuances because of the different words used to express the same idea, but harmonically interdependent because they carried a unified meaning expressed in identical sentence construction, a regularity of rhythm with the same number of stresses in each line, as well

Kegan Paul, 1994, originally published 1940).

as alliteration and assonance. The formal elements of praise poetry, then, echoed the democratic nature of the activity by vocalizing different voices that expressed the same praises while also lending force to the statements of critique the izibongo was making.

Parallelist praise poetry supported and reflected a consensus based political system in its manufacturing of evaluative judgments surrounding a chief's rule. This consensus based critique was achieved through an agreed upon summary of the chief's character, as well as of the historical events that he was part of. Praise poems, for instance, enact a multivocal consensus on Shaka's character through repeated statements that vary in their emphasis while presenting one main idea. For instance, one verse describes Shaka's angry, violent disposition through repeated metaphors to do with fire:

He who goes along making fires and leaving behind conflagrations,
Who when he was rubbed flared up like a fire¹⁹²

Both lines strive to convey Shaka's fierce nature through the metaphor of fire. However, each does so to evoke different aspects of his fiery nature. The first conveys the results of his temperament through an evocation of the burned down villages he left in his wake. The second, meanwhile, comments on what causes this ferocity – the ease with which Shaka was provoked. The line notes that he was dry firewood, quick to burst into flame when rubbed or irritated. The two lines, then, reach a consensus on his aggressive nature while suggesting a multivocality in their reference to different aspects of that fieriness.

¹⁹² Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 98.

Shaka is similarly described through repeated similes referring to his impressive physical size, each with the aim of conveying one main agreed upon point about Shaka's enormous strength and power but with a slightly different emphasis:

He who is as big as his country, enormous one,
He who is as big as mountains.
He who is as big as Sondude mountain,
He who is as big as the tree on the ridge of Maqhwakazi,
On which lived the Ndwandwes and the Nxumalos.¹⁹³

The verse enacts a democratic multivocality through synonyms that reinforce the central point; Shaka is not just "big" but "enormous." This point is conveyed through different similes; Shaka is as big as his country, as mountains, as a tree. The descriptive, repetitive addition of "Sondude mountain" after "mountains" not only emphasizes Shaka's power but evokes a different elaborative voice that responds to the first speaker's initial statement that Shaka "is as big as mountains." The verse, then, enacts a consensus based multivocality by creating the impression of different speakers responding to each other, adding details to, and confirming each others' points.

These kinds of verses also gave power to consensus based critiques of chiefs by emphasizing that the creation of history was a communal project. Shaka's praise poem evokes the necessity of multiple voices recounting a historical incident involving the chief until one unified version is finally agreed upon. For instance, one verse describes Shaka on a rampage as:

Fire of the long dry grass, son of Mjokwane;
Fire of the long grass of scorching force,

¹⁹³ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 106.

That burned the owls on the Dlebe hill,
And eventually those on Mabedlana also burned.¹⁹⁴

Each line adds a different detail to the recounting of the historical incident, emphasizing what the previous speaker has left out. In this regard, the lines are responses to previous voices; the second line repeats “long grass” but leaves out the “dry” and adds scorching. The last line is crafted as a final response and addition to the previous line because it starts with “and” and remarks that the owls on “Mabedlana eventually also burned.” In another similar recounting of a historical confrontation between Shaka and another chief, the praise poetry enacts a parallelist historiography by noting that:

And then there came out two morning stars up in the sky,
The two morning stars came out and confronted one another.¹⁹⁵

The second line repeats the first line’s point that the “two morning stars came out” suggesting a different voice in its additional detail that they “confronted one another.” This kind of parallelist repetition makes the point that while historical truth needs to be unified, the process of its production is a universalizing one in which everyone’s different nuances and additions need to not only be considered but recorded to enable posterity’s own judgment of the specific process through which this consensus was reached.

Parallelist repetition achieves a consensus on a chief’s dominant personality traits, and the historical events he was part of, to lend force to the final critique of his actions. Shaka’s praises alternate between consensus building on his character and his role in

¹⁹⁴ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 90.

¹⁹⁵ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 110.

historical events before building up a powerful denunciation of them. In one such critical verse, the imbongi uses parallelist repetition to describe an unending cycle of violent greed characterized by the word “devour.” In doing so, he suggests that Shaka destroys people so quickly that he is not done destroying one before he moves on to the next. His praises portray a relentless barrage of devastation through a build up of negative verbs that, while all emphasizing his enormous capacity for destruction, do so through synonyms that give the impression of different voices – thus emphasizing and building a consensus based critique of Shaka’s destructive propensities:

He devoured
He ate up
He killed
He destroyed¹⁹⁶

A parallelist multivocality is also used to link these actions directly to Shaka’s unwillingness to share power. The imbongi sings:

For he ate up the cattle that were murmuring,
For he ate up the cattle at the Dlodlweni kraal.
Overflowing one that disregards warning,¹⁹⁷

The parallel repetition of the first two lines, “for he ate up the cattle,” gives the impression that two different voices are speaking of Shaka’s actions. While one specifies that the “cattle were murmuring,” the other notes that they belonged to Dlodlweni’s kraal. The parallelism, through similar accounts of the event placed in conjunction with each other lends force to the imbongi’s view of Shaka, making it a democratic, yet unified,

¹⁹⁶ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 100.

¹⁹⁷ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 114.

consensus based voice of critique about Shaka's overindulgence in eating other people's cattle. The imbongi characterizes him as "overflowing" with the cattle he has eaten. Moreover, the word "overflowing" functions at another level, referring to one who is overflowing with milk, which symbolized power. He points out, in other words, that Shaka is so miserly that he allows his power to overflow and be "wasted" rather than sharing it.

A similar example of a parallelist consensus based critique appears in the imbongi's description of Shaka's massacre of the Langeni clan of which his mother was a member:

King, you are wrong because you do not discriminate,
Because even those of your maternal uncle's family you kill,
Because you killed Bhebhe son of Ncumela of your maternal uncle's
family.¹⁹⁸

The verse builds the impression of multiple voices achieving a consensus on the horrendousness of Shaka's behavior by giving each line, or voice, a different role. The first gives a unified opinion of his actions, the second gives a reason for that opinion, while the third repeats and adds to the second line, providing details of the person Shaka killed.¹⁹⁹ The verse, then, achieves a unified consensus based critique that achieves its rhetorical force by giving the impression of different people filling in different aspects of critical indicting information that confirms Shaka's "wrongness."

¹⁹⁸ Stuart, Malcolm, Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, 110.

¹⁹⁹ He did not actually kill Bhebhe, he killed Bhebhe's people as revenge for the treatment he had received there as a boy.

In 1828, three assassins from Shaka's own tribe crept up to the royal kraal and murdered him, dumping his corpse into an empty grain pit and filling it with mud and stones. This was a fitting symbolic rejoinder to Shaka's lack of grain provision to his subjects. By that time, Shaka had made enough enemies among his own people to hasten his demise, which came relatively quickly following the devastation Shaka wreaked after the death of his mother. As historians have noted, in this mourning period, Shaka ordered that no crops should be planted during the following year, no milk was to be used, and any woman who became pregnant was to be killed along with her husband. At least 7,000 people who were deemed to be insufficiently grief-stricken were executed, along with thousands of cows so that their calves would know what losing a mother felt like.²⁰⁰ In his final years, then, Shaka carried out a terrifying, single minded assault on the communal system of food production and sharing that produced and buttressed Zulu democratic cultures and behaviors. It is not surprising, then, that his half brothers, along with tribal co-conspirators, were to take political power into their own hands, bringing the izibongo's poetic warnings to Shaka to fruition.

As I have argued, the aesthetic forms and content of Zulu praise poetry and izagu enact "a chief is a chief through other people" in their radical critique and regulation of despotic chiefly power. In doing so, they offer a contextually grounded, yet universalizing conceptualization of democratic cultures and institutions, expressed through literary devices that are continuous with their humanist messages. Democratic

²⁰⁰ Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: the Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998). See also Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard K Mbenga, and Robert Ross, *The Cambridge History of South Africa – Volume 1, From Early Times to 1885*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).

behavior, then, emerges as a contextual universalism, a “universalizing,” “humanity defining” idea that is not a colonial import, and that responds to local and colonial legacies of domination. Importantly, these praise poems also illuminate what alternative institutional forms, such as communal agricultural systems, buttressed and produced these indigenous “modern” discourses. They ask us to reconsider approaches to alternative modernities that selectively demonstrate how majoritarian systems of democracy were appropriated, and then repeatedly failed, in parts of Africa. This rethinking also challenges views of African indigenous cultures as always developing towards “modernity,” instead showing how modernity itself is a concept that needs to be interrogated. These praise poems, then, reveal a rich historical complexity in non-western cultures that has much political relevance even today.

Chapter 4: Affective Agencies: Contextualizing Individual Freedom in the colonial

Indian *bildungsroman*

In 1888, Krupabai Sathianadhan (1862-1894), touted by her contemporaries as “the first Indian woman writing in English,”²⁰¹ wrote:

What a world of untried work lay before me, and what large and noble possibilities seemed to open out for me! I would throw aside the fetters that bound me and be independent. I had chafed under restraints and the ties which formed the common lot of women, and I longed for an opportunity to show that a woman is in no way inferior to a man. How hard it seemed to my mind that marriage should be the goal of woman’s ambition, and that she should look pretty, and never know the joy of independence and intellectual work! The thought had been galling. It made me avoid men, and I felt more than once that I could not look into their faces unless I was able to hold my own with them. So like a slave whose freedom had just been purchased, I was happy, deliriously happy.²⁰²

Sathianadhan was a convert to Christianity who spent most of her short life in the Maharashtrian city of Bombay, and at the Madras Medical College in Southern India. The above passionate speech is not surprising given that Sathianadhan was not only hailed as the first Indian woman writing in English, she was also one of the first female Indian medical students; she dreamed of becoming a doctor, of doing the “untried work” of helping other women that she spoke so fervently about. She was also one of the first female recipients of a scholarship to study medicine in England, and after she was forced to refuse it on account of her failing health, she was one of the first Indian Christian women to women to start a school for Muslim girls with help from the Church Missionary Society. Sathianadhan’s long list of firsts demonstrate not just the depth of

²⁰¹ Krupabai Sathianadhan, *Saguna*, (New Delhi: OUP, 1998).

²⁰² Sathianadhan, *Saguna*, 131.

her “intellectual work” and drive at a time when women were still fighting to enter the public sphere, they also testify to her belief in universalizing ideas of freedom, which led to her desire to improve the “common lot of women” all over India; even as a Christian convert, she spent her short life fighting for the social well being of Christian, Hindu, and Muslim women alike.

In this chapter, I focus on Krupabai’s universalizing ideas of individual freedom in her *bildungsroman*, *Kamala*. *Kamala* conveys its message that individual freedom is a universal right through the story of the eponymous protagonist, a motherless Hindu girl, who is brought up by a scholarly, Brahmin father, and married into a traditional, upper-caste Brahmin family shortly after puberty. Her husband, Ganesh, makes a short lived attempt to have a “modern,” companionate marriage but soon brings a prospective mistress into the house. Kamala leaves him and Ganesh dies of cholera shortly afterwards. Kamala then learns that her father has left her an immense fortune from Ramchander, a man who secretly adores Kamala and to whom she was once betrothed. He asks her to marry him but she declines and spends the rest of her life as a widow doing charity work for widows and orphans. I argue that Sathianadhan clearly thinks of individual freedom in a way that is similar to modern – specifically Kantian -- ideas of free will, namely, as the ability to make choices without constraint. But she contextualizes her universalizing ideas of agency in the physical body’s experiences of its surroundings rather than in a conscious will that grapples with imposed ideologies.

As I outline in the first chapter, my reading of a universalizing idea of individual freedom in Sathianadhan's *bildungsromane* also hopes to challenge feminist dismissals of universalizing ideas of rights on the grounds that these are always flawed in their ignorance of contextual difference and serve as imperialist tools when transported to other cultural contexts.²⁰³ Instead, I demonstrate how the occurrence of a universalizing idea of individual freedom in a context very different from Enlightenment Europe suggests the possibility of recuperating universalizing humanist frameworks for feminist politics, stressing that such universalizing frameworks can be sensitive to contextual difference. Sathianadhan thus suggests ways out of the cultural relativism vs. universalism debates haunting quests for a universalizing, yet non-colonialist feminism.²⁰⁴ However, Sathianadhan's ideas of individual freedom are not just *an instantiation* of what I call "contextual universalisms." Sathianadhan also theorizes just *how* a universalizing idea of agency can be contextually grounded through her focus on the way that the body's universal corporeality combines with context specific cultural discourses to produce an embodied agency. This focus on the materiality of the body also adds nuance to some post-structuralist accounts of a discursive body that shapes individual freedom, pointing out how the body's dynamism, while shaped by, and perceived through, cultural discourses, cannot be reduced to these discourses, to language. As Judith Butler self-reflexively writes:

I confess, however, that I am not a very good materialist. Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language. This is not because I think that the body is reducible to

²⁰³ For opposing sides of the debate see Quillen, "Feminist Theory, Justice and the Lure of the Human" and Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*.

²⁰⁴ See above footnote.

language; it is not. Language emerges from the body, constituting an emission of sorts. The body is that upon which language falters, and the body carries its own signs, its own signifiers, in ways that remain largely unconscious.”²⁰⁵

Indeed, Saththianadhan’s ideas of embodied agency testify to the irreducibility of the body’s materiality to language; she locates her ideas of individual freedom in a universal physical body that resists relations of domination by drawing on culturally specific structures of feeling that “move” the subject away from oppressive surroundings; as I demonstrate in my analysis Saththianadhan’s *bildungsromane*, while written in English at the height of the colonial period, in the center of a colonial metropolis, and using a European literary form, explicitly draw on indigenous literary genres such as the ancient poetics of the *kavya* genre. Unlike the other South African and Indian literatures I read, then, Saththianadhan’s writing represents an internalization of colonial literary cultures and ideologies but, nevertheless, consciously tries to lay out humanist ideas independently of colonialist frameworks. In doing so, Saththianadhan demonstrates, as I mention in my introduction, that regional literary genres that articulated non-colonialist discourses of modernity, were very much a part of the intertextual universe of Anglophone texts. These indigenous literatures, then, should not simply be read as internalizations of colonialist value systems.

Furthermore, while Bhīma Bhoi’s devotional poetry explored alternative indigenous modernities through the “knowledge revolutions” that defined human worth through actions rather than a preordained religious or social status, and while my analysis of Zulu praise poetry focused on the material institutions that buttressed radical modern

²⁰⁵ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 198.

epistemes, Sathianadhan's *bildungsromane* testify to the effects of "expanding intercultural contacts"²⁰⁶ in impeding, aiding, and altering indigenous modernities. They are an example of how different visions of alternative modernities interact with each other and with colonial modernity, while holding their own in relation to it and even challenging it. In the sections that follow, I argue that Sathianadhan makes the case for a contextually grounded yet universalizing account of individual freedom by first problematizing factional nationalist and colonialist discourses pertaining to the emancipation of Indian women as well as narrative attempts, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (a text that Sathianadhan had most likely read),²⁰⁷ to render the exercise of free will a Christian prerogative. Having done so, Sathianadhan crafts an alternative universalizing narrative of individual freedom that is not limited by religious or political factionalism.

Problematizing Nationalist and Colonialist Discourses of Modernity

Sathianadhan's two novels *Saguna* (1887-88) and *Kamala* (1894) were serialized in *Madras Christian College Magazine*, and her numerous short stories and prose sketches were written during the 1880s and 1890s when the nationalist reform movement²⁰⁸ for Indian women was in full swing.²⁰⁹ As Partha Chatterjee has shown,

²⁰⁶ Friedman, "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism," 507.

²⁰⁷ Krupabai Sathianadhan, *Miscellaneous Writings of Krupabai Sathianadhan* (Madras: Srinivasa, Varadachari and Co. 1896). Sathianadhan was well versed in the British canon, making references to George Eliot, Milton, Wordsworth, Elliot, and, as I demonstrate, very closely echoing passages and plot lines from *Jane Eyre*.

²⁰⁸ The movement arose in reaction to British imperialist assertions that colonialism was necessary to alleviate the supposedly wretched condition of India's women. In response, Indian activists such as Mahadev Ranade placed women at the centre of their own ideological struggle

nationalist discourse set up binaries that defined the home as spiritual and feminine and the outer world as material and masculine. Indian women were represented as the soul of the inner, spiritual, and Hindu world of the home through the figure of the perfect wife.²¹⁰ Such a wife was to be educated in Western style conjugality while simultaneously being a *pativrata*, a woman who embraced devotion to her husband as the ultimate dharma. As Sathianadhan's *bildungsromane* testify, these contradictory ideologies were to have a heavy toll on women, who were often expected by different members of their families to enact and represent different ideologies.

Sathianadhan can be placed in a flourishing tradition of writing during the late nineteenth century that engages these nationalist and colonialist reform movements through a narrative focus on women's lives. Indeed, between the 1880s and the 1920s, Bengali novelists Bankimchandra, Rabindranath Tagore, and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, traced and consolidated social reform themes such as the fight against child marriage, the fight for widow remarriage and the struggle for female education, through female protagonists. While these male Bengali writers received much critical attention, however, their female counterparts' novels and autobiographical accounts of the reform movements, were often overlooked. This was a pity; Sathianadhan and other

for independence. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, nationalists were divided between those who regarded the Indian woman as belonging to a sacrosanct sphere untouched by empire, insisting that women remain isolated in the domestic sphere as they were expected to by 'tradition,' and those who insisted that the anti-colonial struggle required addressing the woman's question through social reform to modernize Indian society. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁰⁹ *Kamala* was first published serially in 1894 in the Madras Christian College Magazine and posthumously as a book in the same year.

²¹⁰ Priya Joshi, *In Another Country*, (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 173.

notable female writers, writing in regional languages as well as in English,²¹¹ gave reformist issues such as child marriage, the hardships of widowhood, the evils of purdah and the need for education, complex new dimensions. Sathianadhan's *bildungsroman*, *Kamala*, for instance, traces many contentious reformist themes while complicating their simplistic calls for reform. Her description of husbands' attempts to educate their wives in line with the Victorian ideal of a companionate marriage invokes the difficulties that young wives faced in being caught between their husbands' wishes to educate them, and their in-laws' resistance to such education. Similarly, her focus on the regretful condition of child widows through the sufferings of her eponymous protagonist invokes the controversial Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 which repealed the ban on widow remarriage for Hindus,²¹² but she still has her protagonist choose not to get remarried, even when the man she loves proposes to her. Sathianadhan, then, was clearly going beyond these ideologies when thinking about what exercising freedom may mean for women.

While fitting into Indian reformist literature, Sathianadhan can also be read as building on and reacting to 18th century British Sentimentalist Literature. As Lynn Hunt argues, sentimental fiction taught its audience new ways of imagining equality. Novels

²¹¹ These included Swarnakumari Debi, who edited the journal *Bharati* (Bengali) and wrote *The Uprooted Vine* in Bengali (1892), Tarabai Shinde (Marathi), and Shevantibai Nikambe, who wrote *Ratanbai* in English (1895).

²¹² The Widow Remarriage Act repealed the ban on widow remarriage on the grounds that there were many Hindus who practiced widow remarriage but who were now unable to do so as the courts run by the East India Company and the British government had declared this illegal. The British codification of Hindu law tended to impose Brahmanic ritual on all Hindus. The law was controversial because it was regarded as a challenge to the authority of the Brahmins. Thus, more than forty petitions against the Bill were submitted by around sixty thousand high caste Hindus. See Radha Kumar's *The History of Doing* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993).

such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* received frenzied acclaim because they encouraged readers to identify with weak female characters who struggled to preserve their autonomy and integrity against various forms of domestic oppression. By creating such bonds of identification, Hunt argues, the novels helped readers understand the Kantian notion that all humans resembled them on a fundamental level, and that everyone possessed inherent natural rights.²¹³ And, because of the sentimental emphasis on emotion, these novels argued for universal rights without Kant's emphasis on rationality being the primary determiner of moral choice.²¹⁴ However, these novels also tied their evocation of empathy in the reader to the idea of a Christian morality; before the 18th century, Christians readily accepted the equality of souls in heaven without connecting them to ideas of equality on earth.²¹⁵ Sentimentalist literature allied the two so that the right to the exercise of agency became seen as a universalizing Christian right. The result can be seen in *Jane Eyre*, which cannot imagine an effective exercise of agency outside a Christian framework or outside of a Christian marriage to Rochester.

Indeed, Sathianadhan was reacting to precisely the transnational genre of women's *bildungsromane*, such as *Jane Eyre*, on the question of individual freedom for

²¹³ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights, A History*, (New York: Norton 2008).

²¹⁴ Kant sees the practical concept of freedom as the independence of our will from the "coercion through sensuous impulses. Our arbitrary will is sensuous, so far as it is affected pathologically (by sensuous impulses); it is called animal (*arbitrium brutum*), if necessitated pathologically. The human will is certainly sensuous...but there is in man a faculty of determination, independent of the necessitation through sensuous impulses." Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (London: Macmillan, 1881,) 461.

²¹⁵ "In all creation every thing one chooses and over which one has any power, may be used merely as means; man alone, and with him every rational creature, is an end in himself." Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 75.

women amidst societal constraints, a genre that emerged as part of the New Woman movement in Britain as well as its colonies.²¹⁶ While the genre of the *bildungsroman* is overwhelmingly concerned with the central conflict between the main character's free will and the society in which they live, as Joseph Slaughter has argued, the *bildungsroman* naturalizes not only human rights values such as individual freedom but also some of the unfair power structures that are a part of rights discourse.²¹⁷ I argue that Sathianadhan's *bildungsromane* are concerned with revealing precisely these contradictions and hypocrisies in Victorian novels such as *Jane Eyre*— a text in which universalizing sentiments about rights do not extend to Britain's non-Christian colonized subjects. In *Saguna*, Sathianadhan thus exposes how, despite Britain's purported imperial "civilizing mission," marks of 'civilization,' such as the right to exercise one's free will, were denied to racialized Christian subjects like herself.

And just as Bhīma does through the *ulti bamsi*, and Zulu *imbongi* do with their parallelist repetition, Sathianadhan conveys this subversive content through equally radical form. She disrupts the linear, progressive narrative of European *bildungsroman* that, in *Jane Eyre*, represents a Christianizing process of individual development. Instead,

²¹⁶ The New Woman was the term used to describe the Indian woman who emerged during the later nineteenth century as a consequence of British colonialist influences, including educational and socio-religious reforms. The New Woman sought greater equality between men and women and wished women to be valued as educated and self-reliant individuals. There is also a Japanese new woman and Korean one: see the edited collection by the Modern Girl Collective, based at the Univ. of Washington. The Modern Girl Collective, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

For a comparison between Sathianadhan's female protagonists as a colonial double to *Jane Eyre*, see Narin Hassan's essay, "Jane Eyre's Doubles?" in *Gilbert & Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic after Thirty Years*, ed. Annette Federico, (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2009).

²¹⁷ Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*

in *Saguna*, Saththianadhan's narrative 'spirals and loops' like the ancient Indian epics, shifting in time to bolster the development of the individual through long flashbacks. *Kamala*, meanwhile, has an intrusive narrative voice that intervenes to contextualize the events it is describing, simultaneously disrupting the *bildungsroman*'s traditional teleological movement from past to present; instead the narrative voice constantly brings the reader back to a perpetual present from which the distant past is being viewed. These changes to the linear "development" of the protagonist structurally undermines colonialist and nationalist assumptions that the "modern" ideologies of companionate marriage and widow remarriage necessarily constituted "progress" for the women they concerned.

Ironically, Saththianadhan's subversion of colonialist missionary narratives as well as nationalist Hinduism in both form and content resulted in her work being appropriated by both groups, each of whom thought that in rejecting the other, she was promoting *their* ideologies. For instance, the *Madras Journal of Education*, the principal contributors of which were senior government officials and missionaries, stated that "Everyone in England should carefully peruse this book... it will shew them how the machinery for working Christian Missions may be improved." Yet another British publication added that "A native Christian lady herself writes of Indian life, so that we get an accurate idea of such life, and truly to our Western experience, there is a great deal of the quaint and curious about what we read. The descriptions of Indian towns are so just and artistic, the ways of the poor Hindu females are so well described, Indian scenery is penciled with such a deft touch... where, the European reader will ask himself, did an Indian lady get hold of such a sweet, tender style? As we read, we fancy it is some English lady who has written the book, so charming it is to us." However, the novels were simultaneously

appropriated and praised by newspapers known for espousing Hindu nationalist reform ideologies. *The Hindu* praised *Saguna* and *Kamala* for the “high moral tone that is maintained throughout” adding that “we hope that the lady writer will be an object lesson to her sisters in Southern India...in her noble and self imposed task of delineating the mind of her Hindu sisters.”²¹⁸

As I have elaborated in my introduction, literary works of this period have too often been read by post-colonial scholars through the colonialist binaries imposed by these hegemonic groups within colonized societies. This has been largely due to the post-colonial focus on colonial discourse analysis, a view that often assumes all discourse as uniformly shaped by power, to the detriment of those such as Satthianadhan, who were drawing on other discourses or, as evident in Bhīma’s devotional poetry and Zulu praise poetry, of those who lived in interstices of the nation state where colonial power had not percolated as deeply. Drawing on the colonial discourse analysis model, contemporary critics such as Chandani Lokuje have concluded that Satthianadhan’s simultaneous engagement with nationalist tradition and colonial modernity signifies a split subjectivity that extends to her protagonist. In Lokuje’s interpretation, one side of Kamala’s personality, or her “alter-ego,”²¹⁹ is simply an archetype of the traditional daughter, wife and mother, whose life’s purpose is dutiful self- sacrifice in the domestic sphere.²²⁰ On the other hand, Lokuje argues, *Kamala* can also be read as a text promoting “colonial modernity” for a Western audience because in criticizing the “orthodox Hindu home,”

²¹⁸ Reviews reprinted in Satthianadhan, *Miscellaneous Writings of Krupabai Satthianadhan*.

²¹⁹ Krupabai Satthianadhan, *Kamala*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.

²²⁰ Chandani Lokuje in Satthianadhan, *Kamala*, 4.

Sathianadhan takes on a colonialist persona. I argue, however, that such interpretations read Sathianadhan's novels through precisely the binaries of nationalist tradition and colonial modernity that Sathianadhan was resisting and critiquing. Unlike social reform movements for women that were imposed from above, Sathianadhan, I insist, crafts a universalizing idea of individual agency for women that is not limited by race, religion, or ideology, instead grounding itself in the subject's embodied experience of her surroundings. My general point, then – to return to what I said in my introduction -- is that the concept of modernity is more capacious than what is suggested by the term “colonial modernity,” which refers “to the particular combination of modern social institutions and colonialist ideology that European colonial rule brought with it; this ideology was based on a wholesale devaluation of traditional social institutions in the societies that were colonized. This ideology was used to justify colonial rule, but it is possible to separate the ideology from the institutions (and laws, values, etc.) associated with modernity.”²²¹ Instead, I suggest along with other scholars that we explore non-colonialist forms of modernity that exist in cultural texts. I start by demonstrating Sathianadhan's rejection of colonialist modernity, in her readings and rewritings of *bildungsromane* such as *Jane Eyre* and *Saguna* respectively. I then analyze her own construction of an alternative modernity based in universalizing assertions of individual freedom that were grounded in indigenous cultural and literary currents.

Problematizing *Jane Eyre*'s Free/Christian Soul

²²¹ See the introduction of the forthcoming volume Mohanty (ed.), *Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature: A View from India*, 18.

Sathianadhan was dissatisfied with the contradictions and hypocrisies of colonialist modernity that she perceived in Victorian novels such as *Jane Eyre*— a text in which universalizing sentiments about rights do not extend to Britain’s non- Christian colonized subjects and which both *Kamala* and *Saguna* draw on and revise. As Joyce Zonana has argued in her well-known article on *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s story depends on discourses of Christian ‘feminism’ that represent agency as being a Christian prerogative, and Oriental heathens as denying freedom to their women. Jane finds it possible to resist Rochester at first because he acts in ways that clearly echo the Western conception of "Mahomet," not Christ. Zonana notes that Jane objects to a "pagan" tendency in Rochester²²² when he sings a song to her in which a woman swears "to live-to die" with her beloved.²²³ Jane asserts that she "had no intention of dying" with Rochester: "I had as good a right to die when my time came as he had: but I should bide that time, and not be hurried away in a suttee."²²⁴ Jane’s own idea of an agency with Christian valences, then, depends on a contrast with a “pagan” or “Mahometan” oppression.

This characterization of oppressed Oriental womanhood in need of rescue was

²²² Joyce Zonana, “The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of ‘Jane Eyre,’” *Signs* 18. 3 (Spring, 1993): 614.

²²³ Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, (New York: Bantam, 2003), 301.

²²⁴ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 301.

Sati is the religious ritual whereby a Hindu widow immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. The widow was led by the religious precept that sati released her from the female body in the cycle of births and also ensured her dead husband’s spiritual salvation. Colonial and evangelist discourse considered sati as symbolic of the oppression of all Indian women as a whole, and used it as a moral justification to impose their presence on India. See Lata Mani, “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India” in *Recasting Women*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990), 88-126.

nothing new; Victorian discourses of freedom for women often took the shape of a feminist individualism that relied on the colonial project of “soul making,” or turning the heathen into a human with a soul. As I argue, in Bronte’s narrative as well as in much Victorian literature, the possession of a “soul” was the necessary precondition to enacting one’s free will, without which one could not be considered fully human. This meant that Bronte had to balance Jane’s exercise of free will in choosing to marry Rochester, instead of becoming a missionary, with the narrative background of St John’s mission to civilize the Indians into possessing a soul: "My vocation? My great work? ... My hopes of being numbered in the band who have merged all ambitions in the glorious one of bettering their race-of carrying knowledge into the realms of ignorance-of substituting peace for war-freedom for bondage-religion for hope of heaven, for the fear of hell."²²⁵ Here, the “human” characteristics of “peace” and “freedom” are semantically linked to the promise of a Christian heaven. Despite the many critiques of Christian ideology and practice that abound in *Jane Eyre*, here Bronte obscures the patriarchal oppression that can also a part of Christianity. Bronte ends her text by elevating St. John’s words, who "labors for his race" with the same imperial impulses as Jane: "Firm, faithful, and devoted, full of energy and zeal, and truth ... he clears their painful way to improvement; he hews down like a giant the prejudices of creed and caste that encumber it."²²⁶ Bronte ends her story with St. John's words because they “externalize and make global what has been her own internal and local project all along: the purging of oriental elements from her society and

²²⁵ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 376.

²²⁶ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 477

the replacement of "Mahometan" law by Christian doctrine."²²⁷

In line with the idea that free will is a Christian prerogative, Jane's choice to marry Rochester, despite their class differences, is figured as the privilege afforded to a Christian soul. According to R. B. Martin, the union is significant because it is the outcome of a Christian test: "the test is to become worthy of love, not to take it on any terms but to deserve it: not to violate one's own nature and morality but so to expand that nature that it deserves reward. Jane and Rochester, learning to respect the inviolability of the soul as much as earthly delights, become a microcosm of man's striving for Christian reward."²²⁸ In line with this, Jane's exercise of her freedom of choice can only happen once she concentrates on her own "soul making," expanding her own "nature and morality" to result in the "inviolable soul" that then deserves the "Christian reward" of marital happiness with Rochester.

Bronte therefore demonstrates that before becoming capable of exercising her free choice to marry Rochester, Jane must prove that she has a Christian soul worthy of making that free choice. Indeed, as I argue, Jane's eventual marriage to Rochester, and the 'soul making' that enables that free choice, happens by the grace of a Christian God who manifests himself in humane "Christian" relationships which Bronte enacts and naturalizes through descriptions of the natural world. Her process of soul making takes

²²⁷ Zonana, "The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of 'Jane Eyre,'" 615.

²²⁸ Robert B. Martin, *Charlotte Bronte's Novels: The Accents of Persuasion*. (NY: Norton, 1966), 83.

place over the three days after she leaves Rochester, having discovered he is already married. Bronte makes it clear that the only thing that gives Jane strength to flee is a Christian God and the nature through which this God manifests Himself: "I had injured-wounded-left my master. I was hateful in my own eyes. Still I could not turn, nor retrace one step. God must have led me on. As to my own will or conscience, impassioned grief had trampled one and stifled the other."²²⁹ It is God's will and conscience, enacted through the symbolic space of the natural world, then, that sustains her: "Night was come, and her planets were risen: a safe, still night: too serene for the companionship of fear. We know that God is everywhere: but certainly we feel His presence most when His works are on the grandest scale spread before us; and it is in the unclouded night sky, where His worlds wheel their silent course, that we read clearest His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence."²³⁰ Here, Jane's exercise of choice in running away, is semantically linked to God's design; her "free" will is sanctioned by God. After certain fortuitous "acts of God" that conveniently kill off Rochester's heathen wife, give Jane an inheritance that renders her financially independent, and introduce her to close relations of the kind she has always longed for, Jane asks Him to "show me the path."²³¹ Finally, deeming her tried and tested soul worthy of reward, God leads her back to Rochester by enabling her to miraculously hear his cry for her from miles away.

Rochester also undergoes the same process of Christian legitimization and soul

²²⁹ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 347.

²³⁰ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 350.

²³¹ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 369.

making that enables him to exercise his free will to marry Jane. When Jane encounters him at Ferndean, he is barely human; he is animal like in his appearance, deformed and alone. Jane therefore declares that "it is time someone undertook to rehumanize you,"²³² and Bronte figures his subsequent change of behavior as an emotional act of Christian conversion: "Jane! you think me, I dare say, an irreligious dog: but my heart swells with gratitude to the beneficent God of this earth just now... I did wrong.... Of late, Jane-only-only of late-I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance, the wish for reconcilment with my Maker. I began sometimes to pray."²³³ Rochester is born again; he is no longer a 'dog' but a human because he is a Christian man. He therefore frequently references his merciful God, and thanks Him for Jane and all other subsequent blessings. It is only fitting, then, that after Rochester's conversion, more "Christian" miracles rain down on them. They are married, their child is born and the gift of sight is also bestowed upon him, which he considers an endowment from God: "On that occasion he again, with a full heart, acknowledged that God had tempered judgment with mercy."²³⁴ Rochester's literal blindness, then, serves as a metaphor for his spiritual blindness, and fittingly his sight can only be restored when he first 'sees' God through Jane. With his sight restored, the world is "no longer a void," to Rochester. Similarly, his previously "void" spiritual life is also filled with the blessings of a Christian soul, as are their lives together.

²³² Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 371.

²³³ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 471.

²³⁴ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 385.

Since the exercise of free will depends on the development of a Christian soul, Jane and Rochester must complete their journey of soul making before they are completely free to marry. It is only after this that a Christian God manifests himself through a romanticized natural world to bless their union and to symbolize the emotive renewal Jane and Rochester undergo as individuals and as a couple. Jane takes Rochester into "cheerful fields,"²³⁵ describing the "brilliantly green" grass, the "sparklingly blue sky"²³⁶ under the "open air" of the world. The language is alive and joyful as it describes the wonder spread before Jane and Rochester. Such descriptions emerge as metaphors for their shining new relationship in which love provides a new, promising future. It is the achievement of a Christian soul that makes them "human," then, that renders Jane and Rochester worthy of exercising their free will, as opposed to the inhuman Oriental heathen "others" that pepper the subtext of Bronte's narrative.

Resisting the Christianization of Freedom: Sathianadhan's *Saguna*

While in *Jane Eyre*, conversion is a privilege that the West must bestow on the uncivilized natives of its colonies, in her study of conversion in colonial India, Gauri Viswanathan argues that the act of conversion in the colonial context was very much a mode of resistance; it was a means of questioning the limitations of secular ideologies, particularly the discourse of rights central to both the British Empire and the British nation-state. Implicit in such questioning was an attempt to construct an alternative

²³⁵ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 374.

²³⁶ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 374.

epistemological and ethical foundation of national community.²³⁷ Saththianadhan's *bildungsromane* complicate both Viswanathan's claims and Bronte's imperial project of 'civilizing the natives,' because while Saththianadhan contests the limitations of secular ideologies and the British Enlightenment discourse of rights as Viswanathan suggests, her *bildungsromane* do not dismiss the notion of rights altogether. Instead, Saththianadhan claims rights as a universal legacy that are not limited by British, Christian, or Hindu prejudices, while simultaneously being locally grounded in culturally specific structures of feeling. First, Saththianadhan chronicles how the experience of being an Indian Christian in colonial India was marked by contradictions; to be considered Christian was not only to construct an alternative national community by rejecting nationalist inventions of tradition as Viswanathan describes, but also, ironically, having to align oneself with the colonial state by subscribing to British culture and supporting the British imperial project. The corollary of this was that marks of 'civilization,' such as the right to exercise one's free will or agency, was not only portrayed as Christian but also necessarily British. Since an Indian Christian was not British, however, she was often denied the privilege of possessing the rights accorded to a Christian soul, always being seen as less human than a white British Christian. *Saguna* testifies to this conflict, and in her next *bildungsroman*, *Kamala*, Saththianadhan ends up resisting the idea of agency being a Hindu, Christian or British prerogative, instead choosing to craft a universalizing humanist idea of individual freedom that is not limited by race or religion .

²³⁷ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

With deliberate irony, Sathianadhan names the Christian protagonist of the novel, *Saguna*, after a Hindu tradition of idol worship that offers devotion to a God with many forms. It is not surprising, then, that she crafts this main character as impulsively equating the right to agency with Christianity only to realize the fallacy of doing so. Saguna first figures the natural world as the space in which a Christian God's will is orchestrated as Bronte does in *Jane Eyre*. The landscape of freedom is a Christian one recreated in Edenic glory; just as Jane refuses to be "grilled alive in Calcutta," Sathianadhan's protagonist ironically points out that free will can never be realized within a "shadowy, dark and mystic, primitive land of bigotry and paganism."²³⁸ Saguna's revered older brother describes the Indian landscape in precisely these terms: "It was just like this, shadowy, dark, mystic, weird, with superstition and bigotry lurking in every corner, before the light of Christianity comes into a land. When the sun rises, he said, all the glory of the trees and rocks comes into view, each thing assumes its proper proportions and is drawn out in greater beauty and perfection. So it is when the sunbeams of Christianity dispel the darkness of superstitions in a land."²³⁹ Symbolically, then, the sun of Christianity claims the land by creeping along the landscape and driving back the shadows of Hinduism to achieve a Romantic union with the natural landscape. However, Sathianadhan deliberately reminds the reader that Christianity cannot be separated from colonialist oppression, and that missionaries can never deliver on their promises of Christian freedom to their native converts by reminding the reader that literally too,

²³⁸ Sathianadhan, *Saguna*, 15.

²³⁹ Sathianadhan, *Saguna*, 15.

British Christianity, always in conjunction with the British Empire, captures increasing amounts of Indian territory.

Sathianadhan thus reveals the dangers of equating Christianity with civilization, pointing to how such a conflation can be stretched to a justification of the British Empire; In doing so, she demonstrates how one could not be an Indian Christian without also subscribing to colonizing “civilizing” ideologies. Echoing an Orientalist standpoint about the primitive and exotic orient in a scene on the banks of an “Indian river,” she sketches a suggestively sensual sight, titillating the reader with exotic images of “scantly clad widows,” “gaily attired damsels with the beauty of the lotus and grace of the deer,” “artless little creatures just verging on maidenhood... chiming steps and saucy movements”²⁴⁰ but, as Lokuje points out, simultaneously depicts it all with a superior Western distaste for the uncivilized and Unchristian. Thus, an implicitly Christian nature looks down disapprovingly on a Hindu landscape. “All the time the swollen angry river rushed on unmindful of the concourse, and the gigantic trees of the tapawanum (meditation grove) from their lofty height looked solemnly down on the scene.”²⁴¹ She reminds the reader that from a British perspective this is a scene of typical Hindu corruption needing the salvaging effects of the British Empire by describing the distant “noise in the temple, the ringing of many bells, and the blowing of horns.” This was so much like what British reviewers were used to from their own writers that one comments “The description of Indian towns are so just and artistic, the ways of the poor Hindu

²⁴⁰ Sathianadhan, *Saguna*, 42.

²⁴¹ Sathianadhan, *Saguna*, 32.

females are so well described, Indian scenery is penciled with such a deft touch...’’²⁴² Far from endorsing these viewpoints, Sathianadhan was demonstrating that to convert to Christianity was to inescapably align yourself with colonialist Orientalist ideologies about the uncivilized, inhuman heathen “Other” in need of rescuing by the empire.

Sathianadhan depicts these connections between “humanity” and “Christianity” only to unsettle them, pointing out how the identification of her protagonists with Christianity and British civilization meant that they would have to reject their Indian identity altogether, something that they were unable to do. When Saguna’s father studies Hinduism, Sathianadhan comments that he does so with a “patriotic ardour;” with a passion not for the religion but for his country. His community and family’s objections to his conversion are founded, similarly, on grounds of national and racial disobedience rather than religious disobedience. “Their objection to the religion of Christ was that it was a foreign religion, the religion of the conquerors, and that it was, therefore, very unpatriotic for an orthodox Hindu to exchange his own faith for that of the foreigners.’’²⁴³ Although at that point Sathianadhan refutes such a conviction by writing that “Harichandra was of course proof against this argument. Patriotism which sacrificed truth to blind sentiment was, he said, no true patriotism,’’²⁴⁴ other moments in the novel betray her lack of conviction that true patriotism could be Christian; on one occasion, for example, Saguna proudly asserts what a committed Indian her older brother is by quoting

²⁴² Malabar and Travancore Spectator, “Opinions of the First Edition,” in Sathianadhan, *Miscellaneous Writings*.

²⁴³ Sathianadhan, *Saguna*, 48.

²⁴⁴ Sathianadhan, *Saguna*, 38.

his defining of himself in Hindu terms as a Brahmin: “He was a Brahmin, he said, a Brahmin to the backbone, and he would show his countrymen what it was to be a real patriot, to live and die for one’s land.”²⁴⁵

After demonstrating the difficulties of negating one’s Indian identity for the sake of conversion, Saththianadhan depicts how even after her protagonists converted, they were not regarded by the British colonizers and missionaries as entitled to the agency accorded to Christian souls on account of their Indian culture. Saththianadhan describes Saguna’s visit to missionaries’ homes with her mother. At the time, the narrative voice tells us, her “mother was dressed in the orthodox fashion, as if she had been a typical Brahmin lady. Nothing would induce her to alter her dress.”²⁴⁶ Despite being Christian converts, Saguna and her mother are not offered a chair to sit on, implying instead that the floor is good enough for them. The missionary’s wife, meanwhile, “herself sat on a chair.²⁴⁷” Saguna feels this humiliation so keenly that she herself “drew a chair for mother, and myself stood by her side. I was myself also asked to sit but remained standing.”²⁴⁸ When the visit ends, Saguna requests her mother never to take her to a missionary’s house again. Despite their conversion, then, Saththianadhan demonstrates that their “Indian” identity prevents them from ever being seen as truly “Christian,” or

²⁴⁵ Saththianadhan, *Saguna*, 29.

²⁴⁶ Saththianadhan, *Saguna*, 56.

²⁴⁷ Saththianadhan, *Saguna*, 56.

²⁴⁸ Saththianadhan, *Saguna*, 56.

entitled to the humanity, dignity, and free will that is assumed to be a Christian prerogative.

Satthianadhan, therefore, insists on the “humanness” of her protagonist’s Hindu heritage despite her conversion to Christianity. When a missionary calls Saguna’s friend who appears selling bibles at the door “a mere servant, fit only to be received in the kitchen,” Saguna responds that their Brahmanism makes them the “real aristocrats of our country, and that the English ladies who came to India only belonged to the middle class...She (the bible woman) is a Brahmin, and only takes money from the mission because she is poor. She is no servant. In your country you are no Brahmins. You are Sudras.²⁴⁹” Interestingly, Saguna does not defend herself or her Indian Christian friend through an assertion of their common Christianity. Instead she reverts to bringing up her proud Hindu heritage and judging the missionaries’ social standing in Hindu terms of caste despite her conversion. This is significant because missionaries often propagated Christian conversion as a way for lower castes to escape discriminatory caste categories. Saguna, however, was a convert from a high caste Brahmin heritage, and therefore a convert solely due to a true belief in Christianity. Her decision to highlight her higher caste as proof of her superiority undermines hypocritical missionary epistemes by demonstrating how their similar prejudices drive converts back to the very caste structures, the supposed antithesis of individual freedom, that they promoted Christianity as resisting. Satthianadhan’s *Saguna*, then, responds to *Jane Eyre*’s mission to civilize the

²⁴⁹ Sudras in the Hindu caste system are the lowest caste, typically servants and workers.

Satthianadhan, *Saguna*, 70.

natives through conversion by demonstrating the impossibilities of an Indian Christian being accepted as equals by their British colonizers, despite their shared religion.

Crafting an Alternative Universalizing Agency: Free Affect in *Kamala*

Sathianadhan's second *bildungsroman*, *Kamala*, carries this critique further by contending that free will is a universal right through the story of the eponymous protagonist, Kamala. Throughout the travails of her protagonist, including child marriage, being educated for a companionate marriage, suffering her in laws' ill treatment of her and her husband's unfaithfulness, and then finally widowhood, Sathianadhan points to Kamala's belief in the innate dignity of human beings as well as cultural perceptions of the natural world as a space where these universalizing ideas can be experienced and realized.²⁵⁰ Raymond Williams calls such attitudes "structures of feeling," by which he means the general organization of emotion and experience in a given period and the ways in which common values or shared generational experiences shape subjective experience. Crucially, Raymond Williams differentiates such structures of feeling from ideology, arguing that structures of feeling belong to the level of "formative processes" that shape experience—not, in his view, to the more developed structures and social positions that

²⁵⁰ Medical Anthropologist Margaret Lock calls the process by which these latent attitudes affect the way we inhabit our bodies, "local biologies." She argues that cultural ideas can drastically impact the way people inhabit their bodies. For instance, she demonstrates that Japanese women, who perceive menopause less negatively than their Western counterparts, actually experience menopause differently physically. See Margaret Lock and Patricia Kaufert "Menopause, *Local Biologies* and Cultures of Aging" *American Journal of Human Biology* 13.4 (2001): 494-501.

characterize ideology.²⁵¹ A similar distinction is also maintained by Saththianadhan, who differentiates latent universalizing cultural attitudes from the nationalist and colonialist ideologies that she perceives as being imposed on her. Saththianadhan bases Kamala's ability to make such a distinction on affect, which I define through Brian Massumi, as the way that emotions register in the body as physical sensation.²⁵² I am arguing, then, that Kamala's affects, for instance "flushes of shame," "shivers of elation," or "choking anger" enable her to recognize oppressive situations and act against them in line with universalizing humanist structures of feeling.

How exactly might the subject enact agency through affect?²⁵³ According to Brian Massumi, affective experience involves the impingement of hundreds of stimuli upon the human body. In adults, according to Neurologist Oliver Sacks, this registering of affect is pure potential, or, a measure of the body's readiness to act in a given circumstance. Sacks gives the example of an elderly patient whose hip fracture had immobilized her leg to such an extent that she felt it was missing. However, when she heard music she would involuntarily tap her foot to the beat. The recollection of the latent "structure of feeling" involving the cultural experience of listening to music, which included the reaction of neurons to external stimuli, could move her leg when her conscious will alone could

²⁵¹ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, (London: Broadview Press, 2001).

²⁵² Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual, Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

²⁵³ Talal Asad connects this kind of agency with physical sensation in the context of religious experience but does not elaborate on how exactly agency and affect relate to each other; he simply argues that 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, *Formations of the Secular*, 78.

not.²⁵⁴ Affect, then, preceded the woman's conscious will to move her leg. I suggest that Sathianadhan's similar descriptions of Kamala's affective potentials for action poses an alternative to Kantian theorizations of the conscious will being the prime determiner of free will and individual choice. Instead, Sathianadhan demonstrates that rational action can be based on unconscious, sensual modes of embodiment.

Sathianadhan portrays her protagonist's affective agency as being prompted by universalizing humanist structures of feeling orchestrated in a romanticized natural world. For instance, Kamala treats religion as an affective natural space where her mind can "follow pictures of her own making" to do with a "scene, rude, bold – a mountainous place where in the midst of dim, dark surroundings, she experienced an exaltation of spirit which made her feel that God was there and that she was in the presence of an almighty power."²⁵⁵ Nature as an affective space is not only able to provide Kamala with an alternate theology from missionary Christianity and nationalist Hinduism but also functions here as music does for the hip fracture patient, meaning more to Kamala than meaning itself, and producing stimuli which are registered in her being affectively as an "exaltation of spirit."

It would be a misreading to attribute this alternative pantheistic theology wholly to an internalization of the European romantic literary tradition. The classical mythological *kavya* literature of India also portrays nature, instead of institutionalized religion, as a feminine space that functions as the spiritual witness and moral arbitrator of

²⁵⁴ Oliver Sacks, *A Leg to Stand On*. (New York: Touchstone, 1984), 170-71.

²⁵⁵ Sathianadhan, *Kamala*, 84.

women's lives. For instance, the female protagonist of the ancient epic, *the Ramayana*, is born from a furrow of earth and disappears back into it to escape from her husband's mistreatment of her. Kamala's inner self is also aligned with the natural world so that nature functions as the antithesis of inherited and institutionalized ideologies that represent self-alienation. Sathianadhan therefore portrays the natural world as the symbolic space where Kamala can flourish without external constraints.²⁵⁶

Instead, Sathianadhan's characterization of the natural world can be read as deliberately drawing on Indian literary traditions to critique nationalist inventions of Hindu tradition that relegated women to the inner, spiritual world of the home. In contrast, Sathianadhan portrays the home, the arena where both colonial and nationalist reform efforts were being played out, as a place of entrapment and the outdoor landscape as one of freedom for women that is apart from patriarchal injunctions. This dialectic continues to operate throughout the text. For instance, Sathianadhan characterizes the inner quarters of the city through the disjuncture between ideological expectations of women in the city, and Kamala's own desires grounded in universalizing structures of feeling. Sathianadhan describes how in the countryside Kamala "felt free like the air around her, and untrammelled by caste superstition and fear, she entered joyously into the spirit of the rural diversions, taking an interest in the simple rustic souls around her, hugging their little black babies when they ran to her and joyously clung to her feet. She

²⁵⁶ Sathianadhan then, was clearly very much a product of her historical moment, drawing on both romantic literary traditions and regional Indian literary genres, including the *kavya*. Of course, we know that this kind of romantic return to nature has been a fraught one. For instance, feminist scholars have often pointed to patriarchal equivalences of women with nature, a landscape that resonates with some eternal essence of femininity. However, as I argue in the next paragraph, Sathianadhan is doing something very different here.

would forget to bathe after touching the low caste children.”²⁵⁷ The phrase “free like the air” suggests a freedom that precedes the conscious will, that is as inescapably part of the being as air is in the natural world, and can therefore resist such oppressive conventions as artificial caste structures. In contrast, Sathianadhan writes that city bred women “knew nothing of the freedom of hills and valleys and wide fields, the innocence and joy of country homes. Their precocious and artificial childhood ended in a premature and forced womanhood, and there were no gradations of feelings or thoughts for them. Just as the door of a city house leads abruptly into the street where everything is open and glaring, so the threshold of their childhood opened suddenly into womanhood.” The affect of “joy” and “innocence” that the individual can experience in the “freedom of hills and valleys and wide fields” is, then, suddenly forced into conformity with the social world and its power structures.

The affective freedom of the natural landscape as opposed to the constraints of the city is also used to critique child marriage. On the morning of Kamala’s wedding, Sathianadhan gives an elaborate description of her connection with nature: “she stepped over the cool dew-washed stones, picking here and there a wild flower which she pressed against her cheek, and with each gust of wind she felt the happy buoyancy of life which made her forget that she was a bride. The song of the birds rang out sweet and clear...it rose to the heavens, and filled the whole valley; and Kamala felt the melody dance in her

²⁵⁷ Sathianadhan, *Kamala*, 86. The Hindu caste system divides people from different regions into caste hierarchies which are permanent, inflexible and define a person’s occupation and social standing. The lower castes are considered untouchables by the higher castes. The four castes in descending order are: Brahmins – originally the scholars and the priests; the Kshatriyas – the warriors and often as a result of skill in conquest also rulers and landowners; Vaisyas, usually businessmen, traders and artisans; and Sudras – usually the peasants.

veins, and in her wild delight she too danced round the trees. . . . She ran and jumped over the stones like a mountain goat, and sang out in her joy whatever came to her lips.”²⁵⁸

Sathianadhan describes how affect is experienced through external stimuli as intensities of feeling; Kamala’s being registers each “gust of wind” as a feeling, here “happy buoyancy.” These natural stimuli combine with the music of the birds so that “melody dances in her veins” producing a “wild delight.” The descriptions carry strong affective connotations of freedom; “wild,” “dancing” and “buoyancy” are representative of a freedom so agreeable to her repressed will that it can only be described through metaphoric associations with the natural world, so that Kamala is likened to the wind that dances around trees, the birds and their song, and the jumping of a mountain goat. These affective impulses are, in turn, contrasted to her role as “child bride” that the narrative indicates will curb all the joyful impulses that are so integral to Kamala’s personality. Indeed, Kamala feels “a throb of shame and fear” when she realizes that her father-in-law has been watching her and that her displays of positive affect are so out of touch with the behavior expected of her as a new bride. Her affect of throbbing shame and fear signals the oppressive conditions of her child marriage because it indicates the disjuncture between her internalized structures of feeling and the demureness expected of her by nationalist ideologies surrounding the figure of the Hindu wife. Sathianadhan uses affect to advocate a mythological, romantic, and organic foundation to subjectivity that critiques “civilized,” official agendas for a subject that exceeds both and posits an alternative modernity based on her own conceptions of free will.

Sathianadhan links these descriptions of affect to the exercise of agency by using

²⁵⁸ Sathianadhan, *Kamala*, 36.

them to frame the awakening of a consciousness in her protagonist, tracing how Kamala comes to recognize the disjuncture between her own repressed will and the internalized ideologies imposed on her. Saththianadhan begins by noting the “heights and depths in Kamala’s nature of which she herself was unconscious,” pointing out that it is only a matter of time before these “heights and depths” reveal themselves. She conveys the repression of Kamala’s will through the metaphor of a dam, a man made construction, holding back the natural force of a flood: “The ‘open sesame’ had not been uttered. The strength of the floods no one had tested, and their vehemence had not begun to shew itself.” Saththianadhan elaborates that these “torrents” were “confined by artificial barriers” of social conventions, and “lay still and dark.” Finally, Saththianadhan links this image of Kamala’s natural feelings being crushed under the weight of artificial ideologies to her agentive potential. She notes that Kamala “was herself astonished at the way she was drifting along, doing the things that she was bidden to do, like the dumb mule, questioning no one, nor inquiring into the why or the wherefore of anything.” The implications are clear; it is only when Kamala recognizes herself as the “toy and prey of circumstance” that her repressed will can surface: “Once, but only once, a wish intruded itself in the deepest and most sacred chamber of her heart – a wish which made her blush at her boldness and cover her bosom with her hands as if to hide it from herself. Would, she said to herself, that Ganesh had been more like Ramchander. Such a wish, though natural it may seem, was shocking in the extreme to a Hindu girl, who must never allow herself to compare her husband with anybody else.”²⁵⁹ The narrator’s strategic intervention here identifies Kamala’s situation as oppressive by highlighting the

²⁵⁹ Saththianadhan, *Kamala*, 126.

discrepancy between the nationalist ideology of husband worship that Kamala is expected to feel, and Kamala's own repressed desires, a disjunction that registers in her body as the affect of blushing shame, prompting her to shield herself with her hands in a symbolic gesture of embodied action. The narrator reveals that this shame is what initiates Kamala's affective agency.²⁶⁰

Sattianadhan's characterization of Kamala's awakening clearly perceives agency as dependent on an autonomous will that resists relations of domination. Such an understanding of agency has been dismissed by theorists such as Saba Mahmood who insist that since all the choices the subject makes are necessarily produced and mediated by pre-existing structures of power, the idea of an autonomous will that can resist domination must be disposed of. Mahmood, therefore, defines agency "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create." She offers an alternative theorization of agentive action as "the specific ways in which one performs a certain number of operations of one's thoughts, body, conduct, and ways of being, even if they consolidate structures of subordination, in accord with a particular discursive tradition."²⁶¹

I argue, however, that the Foucauldian approach to seeing all resistance as being

²⁶⁰ As Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank describe through the work of Silvan Tomkins, "many developmental psychologists consider shame the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop." "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," *Critical Inquiry* 21.2 (Winter 1995).

²⁶¹ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival."

shaped by power that Mahmood relies on, while insightful, does not capture important differences in how the imposition of power is registered by subaltern subjects themselves at varying historical moments. Sathianadhan's universalizing depiction of Kamala's affective awakening, in explicitly emphasizing the subject's own perceptions of oppression, challenges such post-structuralist theorizations of embodied action because, crucially, they emphasize the subject's own differentiation of what *she* feels is imposed on her and what *she* recognizes as having been internalized according to her own will. In making such a differentiation, Sathianadhan's protagonist suggests that some forms of power are felt more directly as impositions than others, and, by corollary, some forms of resistive action are perceived by subaltern subjects as being more autonomous than others. These nuances stress the value of subjective perceptions of an autonomous will, focusing on how subalterns themselves register ideologies as "autonomous" or forced, and are "moved" to act in accordance to or in resistance against them.

Indeed, Kamala finally acts when her own affect moves her to recognize her marriage as oppressive. She forces Ganesh's mistress out of her home, and leaves, taking only her child with her. Sathianadhan writes: "the tiger element in her nature was roused," a reference that hints at something in Kamala's reaction beyond what social conventions would allow. When Ganesh hits her "she got up, suppressed the pain and facing him said – 'You! You! To strike me for this. Take care that God does not strike you in return.'"²⁶² Once again it is negative affect that alerts her to her oppressive surroundings by indicating a disjuncture between structures of feeling that tell her she is being violated and nationalist ideologies that taught women forbearance in response to

²⁶² Sathianadhan, *Kamala*, 138.

even their husbands' violent actions. The narrator notes that Kamala felt "an icy chill passed through her at his strange sneering manner. She felt something bound round her heart and choking her. Something made her shudder and tremble as she walked." The narrative voice does not specify what the "something" is; unlike other reformist texts of the time, Sathianadhan does not name it as her craving for a feminist independence, nor her disappointed hopes for a companionate marriage, but leaves it deliberately vague, only suggesting that the 'something' is beyond social conventions or ideologies.

This climactic "running away" scene also consciously subverts the Christian moralizing of Jane Eyre's flight from Rochester. In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte characterized Jane's strength to flee as coming from a Christian God and the nature through which this God manifests Himself: "I had injured-wounded-left my master. I was hateful in my own eyes. Still I could not turn, nor retrace one step. God must have led me on. As to my own will or conscience, impassioned grief had trampled one and stifled the other."²⁶³ Here, Jane's exercise of choice in running away is semantically linked to God's design; her "free" will is not her own but that of a Christian God. In contrast, Sathianadhan explains Kamala's agency through a mythological, romanticized structure of feeling that *moves* Kamala away from her oppressive surroundings, making her "shudder and tremble as she walked." Instead of a Christianized natural landscape, Sathianadhan draws on the classical *kavya* genre of Indian epic mythology that characterizes nature as empathizing with the characters' sufferings. In the mythological epic, the *Ramayana*, the forces of nature, seasons, flower shrubs, all grieve with the central protagonist when she is abandoned by her husband: "as she began to weep, peacocks stopped their dances, trees

²⁶³ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 347.

dropped their blossoms, does no longer grazed.”²⁶⁴ Sathianadhan draws on these mythological cultural currents, influences of regional literary currents, to describe how Kamala’s turbulent state of mind is mirrored by “winds howling on all sides and the darkened tree tops rustled ominously. A long desolate plain lay before her.”²⁶⁵

Sathianadhan notes that the “something” that moves her to act was “the passion in her soul” which “was driving her on.” The natural world mirrors this passion, registering in her body as affect, and causing her to be able to act.

Sathianadhan depicts Kamala as tuning into this affect to make all her important decisions, including, contrary to Jane’s climactic reunion with Rochester, Kamala’s refusal to marry the man she loves. At first, marrying Ramchander seems to be just what Kamala wants; Ramchander offers her a freedom which he describes through the kind of affect Kamala has always wanted, one that is orchestrated through the natural world: “You will be free with me – free as the mountain air, free as the light and sunshine that play around you.”²⁶⁶ Although he hints at this pure freedom, however, his words simultaneously undermine it: “Come Kamala, make up your mind. You were mine before you were born. You were promised to me by your mother.” The phrase “you were mine before you were born” denies Kamala’s own affect by framing Ramchander as the agential giver of love and freedom, and Kamala as the agencyless receiver: “I have means at my command of which you know nothing; and love will welcome you in the new world, love such as you have never dreamt of – my love, my undying love and worship.

²⁶⁴ Usharbudh Arya, *Man in Kavya*, (Motilal Banarsidass Publ, 1971), 17.

²⁶⁵ Sathianadhan, *Kamala*, 140.

²⁶⁶ Sathianadhan, *Kamala*, 154.

Accept me and your freedom, and come away with me, and no one will know anything of it.”²⁶⁷ The emphasis on her knowing nothing about the means on which they will live, despite her having means of her own, reinforces the idea that Kamala’s life will once more be structured by another’s discourses rather than through her own desires; the word “worship,” casts Kamala in the mould of nationalist conceptions of the ideal wife as the Grhalakshmi, or the household goddess, thereby limiting her to precisely the nationalist archetype she was resisting.

Kamala therefore accepts the positive affect of Ramchander’s love, comparing it to the physical sensation of light and sunlight on her path that “brightened her life and played around her: Ah! It was happiness to know that someone loved her.”²⁶⁸ However, she foregoes his offer of remarriage, and “frees herself once and for ever from the great overpowering influence of the man before her.” She chooses to enjoy the affective sensation of being loved for the first time in her life while living apart from Ramchander: she spends “all her money in unselfish works of charity; and her name lives even to this day almost worshipped by the simple folks of the place... Far in front was a shrine bearing the name of Kamala, who had now become a saint. Her unseen hands still relieve the poor and protect the unfortunate; for she left her fortune for the sole benefit of widows and orphans.”²⁶⁹ This conclusion also undermines the traditional structure of the *bildungsroman* in which the linear progress of the narrative ends with the protagonist’s

²⁶⁷ Sathianadhan, *Kamala*, 154.

²⁶⁸ Sathianadhan, *Kamala*, 156.

²⁶⁹ Sathianadhan, *Kamala*, 156. She therefore fits into the late 19th century trend of contemporary figures such as Pandita Ramabai whose Mukti Mission, a shelter for widows, had been visited and admired by Sathianadhan in her own lifetime.

reconciliation with social structures. While Jane's journey of self discovery and financial independence ends in a socially sanctioned Christian marital union, Kamala's rejection of Ramchander's proposal undermines such a neat ending; she remains at the periphery of society, helping those also at the periphery. Sathianadhan thus ends her narrative by reverting back to her intrusive narrator's perpetual present symbolized by the monument dedicated to Kamala and her charity work. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, which ends in Jane's reproductive future that buttresses the forward movement of the *bildungsroman*, Kamala remains symbolically frozen in time, a carving in stone, as a reminder that the new woman's agency does not necessarily have to be defined by the protagonist's coming to terms with the hegemonic ideologies of the society in which she lives. Sathianadhan, then, alters the traditional structure of the *bildungsroman* to undermine its colonialist logic of social modernization. She articulates her alternative modern idea of individual freedom through alternative form that does not lead to acceptance of the traditional social norms and mores. In doing so, she demonstrates, as I mentioned in my introduction, how the development of universalizing humanisms was often linked to the form through which they were expressed.

Sathianadhan's *bildungsroman*, then, offers a universalizing theorization of individual freedom that is ideologically apart from colonial conceptions of individual freedom as well as the nationalist ideas of free will that were reactions to them. In doing so, Sathianadhan demonstrates that universalizing assertions of humanity such as those that accompanied Enlightenment modernity were arising in other cultures, drawing on European as well as indigenous literary traditions to resist oppressive ideologies. Furthermore, Sathianadhan's alternative modern idea of individual freedom prompts a

reworking of Kant's theorizations of the conscious will as the primary determiner of individual freedom while also offering a different way of thinking about resistance. Her *bildungsroman* foregrounds not only how subaltern subjects resist hegemonic power structures but how they perceive of, and subsequently embody, their resistance.

Let me conclude this final chapter, then, by restating my main theses. I hope my analysis has shown exactly how subaltern discourse is layered and complex rather than simple and homogeneous. The subaltern, I have argued, may speak more clearly through some discourses than others. My central point is that that there were multiple discourses of modernity being harnessed by subaltern subjects through Anglophone as well as regional language literatures, and that to be able to understand the nuances of the "subaltern's speech," we must be attentive to these multiple mediations, indigenous as well as colonialist, through which they attempted to express themselves. Seen from this perspective, *Kamala* is a powerful critique of the social costs of the nineteenth century's reform efforts, of patriarchal structures such as child marriage that oppress women, and the new colonizing order symbolized by English education that disrupts their domestic sphere. But this critique is made possible by an alternative, non-colonialist version of indigenous humanism. For Sathianadhan indicates the vast territory of female subjectivity that remains untouched by domestic and colonial reform efforts on women's behalf. In the process, she suggests that modernity's humanist universalizing roots were multiple and dispersed, and in doing so, she directs us to alternative epistemologies, including affective agencies, that yet remain to be theorized.

Conclusion

Redefining Alternative Modernities through Indigenous Literatures

My analyses of Bhīma Bhoi's devotional poetry, Zulu praise poetry, and Sathianadhan's Indian *bildungsroman* in English challenge scholarly accounts of modernity as a colonial import into "traditional" societies. These subaltern authors, I suggest, redefine modernity as a descriptive word for any period of radical rupture and resistance against past orthodoxies, a way of questioning the present that insists on a universalizing radical humanism. They ascertain that universalizing ideas of the human, in context-specific forms, were also arising in colonized locations relatively independently from European humanisms. Instead of asking "How were Enlightenment ideas appropriated in India to produce an alternative modernity that was just as Indian as it was European?" (as Chakrabarty does), these texts therefore ally themselves to, and answer, the questions with which I began: "Where else might accelerated societal change brought about by a combination of new technologies, knowledge revolutions, state formations, and expanding intercultural contacts contribute to radical questioning and dismantling of traditional ontologies, epistemologies, and institutional structures?"²⁷⁰ What were the indigenous humanist ideas that lay behind these alternative modernities? What power structures were they arising in response to? And how did they challenge and change colonialist epistemologies?

I have illuminated these questions through subaltern "contextual universalisms," or universalizing assertions of rationality, democratic ideals, and individual freedom.

²⁷⁰ Friedman, "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism," 507.

Each is articulated independently from, and challenges, colonial humanisms even though all are set in different temporal contexts, whether in a pre-colonial society, at the height of the colonial period in marginalized regions of the country, or at the height of the colonial period in a colonial metropolis. Each is contextually grounded in particular local cultures, material and institutional structures, or the physical body. In the process, each “contextual universalism” reflects one component of alternative indigenous modernities, whether it be a knowledge revolution such as Bhīma’s disavowals of caste, institutional, material structures such as the pre-colonial communal Zulu agricultural economy, or the intercultural contact that led Sathianadhan to denounce colonialist religious attitudes and make her universalizing arguments for individual freedom. And each component of these alternative modernities is expressed and developed through very particular literary devices that reinforce and enact socially progressive messages.

Recuperating A Critical Humanism for Postcolonial Studies

In testifying that humanist modernities in India and South Africa were not simply derivative discourses, these texts suggest ways of recuperating the universal human, often dismissed by postcolonial critics for its implication in creating unethical “colonialist modernities.” These postcolonial Foucauldian analyses claim that colonial power was so all-encompassing and totalizing that all universalizing modernities could only have been derived from the dominant colonial discourses. As I have demonstrated in my reading of *Kamala*, this model has led to colonial literatures being read as nothing but reflections of colonialist value systems, an approach that does not capture nuances in how power worked within the boundaries of the nation state, and the differences in how it percolated

down to various colonized populations, areas, and cultures. My readings have shown that that the discourse of European colonial modernity is not the only discourse of modernity through which to view the colonial past, and that the “universal human” was a part of non-colonialist discourses of modernity as well.

I have also responded to post-structuralist critics (such as Cheah) who dismiss the universal human because the “arbitrariness of its signs” produces radical differences in its social use. On the contrary, as my analyses of these texts indicate, the universal human has common referents in South African and Indian cultures. The imagining of universal human capacities and potentials suggest shared understandings of concepts such as “individual freedom” and “dignity” even though their exact constituents and the terms used to express them may vary according to cultural contexts. For instance, Bhīma understands rationality similar to Enlightenment thinkers as the ability to critically differentiate between rational and mythical, magical states of being, the Zulu praise poets understand democracy similarly to Enlightenment thinkers as the universal right to choose how, and by whom, you are governed, but unlike thinkers like J.S. Mill they ground their democratic thought in a consensus based process of decision making rather than the majoritarian democratic system prevalent in the West. Similarly, Sathianadhan imagines individual freedom as the ability to act without constraint just as Kant does but she grounds this agency in the affective experiences of the physical body rather than in a conscious will. Each of these subaltern thinkers, then, makes universalizing humanist assertions that have contextually grounded, similarly understood counterparts elsewhere.

These shared understandings of the universal human suggest the possibility of outlining a post-enlightenment idea of the “universal human,” derived from indigenous epistemologies, that does not conflate the core idea of the universal human with its misuses, and that is not limited by the parameters of Enlightenment conceptualizations of the “universal human.” In the process, I ask: Is “human rights and literature” a possible future direction for postcolonial studies? If so, how can the emerging field of human rights and literature add to existing conversations in postcolonial studies? A recuperated figure of the universal human, too often dismissed as imperialist because of its unfortunate appropriation by colonialist and capitalist structures of exploitation, lies at the heart of this rethinking because it highlights itself both as a regulative ideal and as the potential basis of grassroots alternative modernities grounded in progressive religious and cultural ideas.

Producing Popular Resistance through Alternative Humanisms

Indeed, as I have demonstrated, the subaltern authors of these texts produce their alternative modernities through a grassroots populism that defines itself through “indigenous” universalizing notions of rights. Importantly, these texts are examples of an “indigenous modernity” because they create movements of popular resistance through distinct local and intellectual cultures, very different from those used by colonialists or even by hegemonic nationalist groups in their own societies. Furthermore, the subaltern authors of these literary texts instantiate modern “contextual universalisms” through “traditional” aesthetic mediums, demonstrating that the development of universalizing

humanist ideas was often closely tied to the literary forms through which they are articulated.

Future Directions

These insights suggest a number of fruitful directions for further research. My study of indigenous rationalities in Bhīma Bhoi's devotional poetry demonstrates the need to examine indigenous texts from within their own contexts and local realities. When one views regional discourses, such as Bhīma's anti caste critique, in relation to each other rather than simply as reflections of colonialist discourses, we end up with much more nuanced and accurate pictures of historical realities. These, in turn, lead to the question: "What would a genuinely non-chauvinist literary study look like in the Indian context, and what general themes (similar to "alternative" or "indigenous" modernity) would be highlighted if we de-emphasized literary histories of work in any one language?"²⁷¹ For instance, Bhīma's message of rational social equality draws on centuries old, subcontinent-wide structures of feeling from the devotional bhakti movement that was expressed in multiple regional languages. This populist movement focused on inward love for god in opposition to religious orthodoxies and social hierarchies. Geographically spanning the entire subcontinent, and temporally stretching across centuries to include millions of marginalized peoples, the bhakti movement's "gurus" included tailors, barbers, boatmen, weavers, and even maidservants. They wrote in the vernaculars (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati) rather than in Sanskrit, the language of the gods and the preserve of the higher castes.

²⁷¹ See the introduction of the forthcoming volume Mohanty (ed.), *Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature: A View from India*.

A “genuinely non-chauvinist literary study” would account for the connections between these different thinkers, all of whom were drawing on a rich indigenous intertextuality, and collectively producing a historical knowledge revolution. For instance, Bhīma was drawing on ideas about rational social organization from the time of the ancient Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, which was translated by low caste sage Sarala Das into the vernacular Oriya centuries before Bhīma was writing. *The Mahabharata* revolves around the question of who deserves the throne of Hastinapur, asking whether one earns one’s lot based on one’s actions or because of their place in the kinship, social or religious hierarchy. As Satya Mohanty has shown, Sarala Das makes a similar point in his Lakshmi Purana; the goddess Lakshmi has an egalitarian vision in which the worth of an individual is determined by the individual’s action, duty and work rather than static caste hierarchies.²⁷² Fast forwarding to the 15th century all the way across the country to the northern desert state of Rajasthan, one finds that similar ideas are being expounded in medieval mystic Meerabai's bhakti poetry, a woman who gave up her royal householder life, and sang and danced her message of gender and caste equality across India followed by masses of devotees. She boldly asserted that even an “unlettered, ungainly, low caste, ill mannered and dirty desert tribe girl” could achieve salvation because of her religious “practice:”

The plums tasted
sweet to the unlettered desert-tribe girl-
but what manners! To chew into each! She was ungainly,
low-caste, ill mannered and dirty,
but the god took the

²⁷² Mohanty, “Alternative Modernities and Medieval Indian Literature: the Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* As Radical Pedagogy,” 3–21.

fruit she'd been sucking.
Why? She knew how to love.
She might not distinguish
splendor from filth
but she'd tasted the nectar of passion.
Might not know any Veda,
but a chariot swept her away-
now she frolics in heaven, ecstatically bound
to her god.
The Lord of Fallen Fools, says Mira,
will save anyone
who can practice rapture like that-
I myself in a previous birth
was a cowherding girl
at Gokul.²⁷³

Mira emphasizes that despite not knowing any Veda, the low caste girl is recognized by the divine. She elevates the girl's spiritual practice above written scriptures, even going so far as to call the divine, the "Lord of Fallen Fools," a God who contravenes caste stipulations by eating food "soiled" by a low caste girl. Furthermore, Mira allies her own religious practice with the rapturous, devoted "fallen."

Writing around the same time as Mirabai, but in a different region nonetheless, the medieval poet Kabir, who provided Bhīma with his blunt, questioning, "upside down language" in which he writes, was also making a similar point about the foolishness and irrationality of caste privilege:

If you say you're a Brahmin
Born of a mother who's a Brahmin,

²⁷³ Mirabai, "The Plums Tasted Sweet" in *For Love of the Dark One*, ed. Andrew Schelling, (Prescott Arizona: Hohm Press, 1998).

Was there a special canal
Through which you were born?²⁷⁴

By emphasizing the biological birth canal, Kabir makes a universalizing point about the equal rights due to every “human.”

Sarala Das, Mirabai, Kabir, and then two centuries later, in 17th century Sindh, another Sufi mystic, Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, were all making remarkably similar points often in similar literary registers. Though writing in different vernaculars in different historical contexts, all of these poets emphasized a personal, non-hierarchical, relationship with god. All transferred their ideas to a mass following through vernacular languages, repeating refrains, and simple rhythms. All spoke through female protagonists/a feminine voice to express sensual desire for the Beloved that represented spiritual, meditative yearnings for the transcendental divine. In the process, all also conveyed “modern” messages about individual worth, selfhood and personal freedom in relation to women and lower castes. And Bhīma’s message would not have been the same without any of them. This rich, intertextual universe of regional literatures and populist anti-caste movements belie Chakrabarty’s assertion that “*modern social critiques of caste, oppressions of women, ... of colonialism itself—are unthinkable except as a legacy of how Enlightenment Europe was appropriated in the subcontinent.*”²⁷⁵ Instead, further research into these “modern” subcontinental structures of feeling in varied localized manifestations prompt us to rethink the binaries of the “religious” and “secular” and

²⁷⁴ Kabir, Arvind Mehrotra and Wendy Doniger, *Songs of Kabir*, (New York: NYRB Classics, 2011).

²⁷⁵ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 4-5.

“tradition” and “modernity” through which we have often viewed pre-colonial and colonial Indian societies.

The analysis of these indigenous humanisms in relation to one another also allows one to trace the relevance of politically charged literature to current movements in support of democratic cultures. For instance, while the communal agricultural economy that buttressed democratic behaviors between a South African chief and his subjects have been eradicated in the globalized economy, democratic praise poetry still survives. In fact, praise poetry to ANC leaders during the fight against apartheid was a major method through which mass anti-apartheid support was gathered. Liz Gunner has pointed out that on the day of the “largest political rally of the country” near Johannesburg in 1989, the Sunday Tribune paid tribute to released ANC political prisoners by stating that “today the freed leaders will be honored like kings...and one of the country’s most gifted imbongis wants to make sure the released men hear the story of the people’s suffering.”²⁷⁶ Izibongo are, then, part of an emergent popular democratic culture, an important art form in contemporary political discourse. These contemporary poems bring up fertile questions such as: How does the izibongo form still structure South African relationships to democratic rule? What role do they perform in creating and maintaining a public sphere? Did they manage to maintain their critical edge even as they were appropriated for the purposes of the larger black resistance movement against apartheid rule? What new institutional structures have been put into place to buttress the critical practices of imbongi in contemporary South Africa? How have new literary forms such as black

²⁷⁶ Gunner, Gwala, *Musho! Zulu Popular Praises*, 11.

urban music changed the “traditional” form of the izibongo? And can contemporary izibongo still be regarded as “contextual universalisms,” as “indigenous humanisms that buttress visions of radical alternative modernities?”

Finally, my analysis of indigenous humanisms as evoked by Sathianadhan’s affective literary devices suggest new ways of reading Anglophone postcolonial texts that do not focus exclusively on how they function as reflections of colonialist epistemologies. Thus a postcolonial, South African novel such as Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*, set in the interregnum, can be read not just as resistance literature aimed only at countering colonialist social structures and knowledges but, as Mda himself points out, as an experiment in form that keeps alive alternative indigenous epistemologies. As Rita Barnard has noted, *Ways of Dying* uses a “multilayered, fantastic plot, that decisively breaches the generic constraints that the culture of resistance, with its demand for realist immediacy, had for years placed on the black writer.”²⁷⁷ Indeed, I would argue, the novel impedes the developmental dynamic of the *bildungsroman* form, just as *Kamala* does, with indigenous literary devices; the novel uses development flashbacks, diverse anecdotes, and editorializing commentary to produce a collective concept of narrative akin to the izibongo form. Through the main character of a “traditional funeral orator,” the “novel” insists on a public, communal account of how each and every deceased person met his or her end, exploring, in the process, the political injustices carried out by rival political factions. While the task of Toloki the orator is, like the imbongi’s, one of

²⁷⁷ See Zakes Mda, “Learning from the Ancient Wisdom of Africa in the Creation and Distribution of Messages,” *Current Writing* 6 (1994): 139-140. And Rita Barnard, “On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*,” *Novel* 37 (Summer 2003).

narrator, historiographer, and storyteller to the people, it is similarly one of democratic critique. As Rita Barnard notes, it always involves deliberately open ended debate about the conventions that should apply, whether they be factual accuracy, eulogy, self-expression, communal solidarity, social critique, or consolation.²⁷⁸

A study of alternative indigenous modernities, then, provides fascinating future directions with which to transform Postcolonial Studies' quest for epistemically just ways of exploring colonized societies. It lays out ways of recuperating a critical humanism from oft overlooked indigenous sources that produce a more accurate picture of "alternative modernities." It does so through attention to carefully chosen regional literary devices that are integral to the humanist messages they articulate, and the populist movements they incite. It supplies a theoretical path out of the cultural relativism vs. universalism binaries haunting postcolonial cultural studies. It offers tools with which to analyze traces of "indigenous modernities" today without ignoring the globalized modernity of which they are a part. And finally, such a study suggests ways of reading literatures that remain alert to the rich complexity of indigenous literary forms, as well as the colonial intertextual universe that produced them.

²⁷⁸ Barnard, "On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*."

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