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# DEAD WOMEN TELL NO TALES: ISSUES OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY, SUBALTERN AGENCY AND TRADITION IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL WRITINGS ON WIDOW IMMOLATION IN INDIA'

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Sati has been a focal point not only for the colonial gaze on India, but also for recent work on post-coloniality and the female subject, for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian discourses about tradition, Indian culture and femininity, and, most crucially, for the women's movement in India.<sup>1</sup> Reading these various discourses against each other and in the context of the specific cultural moments and inter-cultural tensions in which they are produced is often a frustrating task because of the astounding circularity of language, arguments and even images that marks discussions on sati from the late eighteenth century till today. This circularity has sometimes been used to indicate the enormous shaping power of a colonial past on contemporary India society, or 'to question', as Lata Mani puts it, 'the "post" in "post-colonial"' <sup>2</sup> While such an emphasis has been useful in indicating the continued economic, cultural and epistemological hegemony of the West, and salutary in questioning Eurocentric intellectual paradigms, it has also contributed to a lack of focus on the crucial shifts from colonial to post-colonial governance and culture. To isolate the study of colonialism from that of its later evolution is to deflect attention from the narratives of nationalism, communalism and religious fundamentalism which are the crucibles within which gender, class, caste or even neo-colonialism function today.<sup>3</sup>

Widow immolation is one of the most spectacular forms of patriarchal violence; each burning was and is highly variable, and is both produced by and helps to validate and circulate other ideologies that strengthen the oppression of women. But for the most part, representations of sati have tended to homogenize the burnings and to isolate them from the specific social, economic and ideological fabric in which they are embedded. Thus the spectacularity of widow immolation lends itself to a double violence: we are invited to view sati as a unique, transhistorical, transgeographic category and to see the burnt widow as a woman with special powers to curse or bless, as one who feels no pain, and one who will be rewarded with everlasting extra-terrestrial marital bliss. She is marked off from all other women by her will; thus her desire, her 'decisions' are to be revered by the community even as theirs are consistently erased. Paradoxically

but necessarily, this process also casts the burning widow as a sign of normative femininity: in a diverse body of work, she becomes the privileged signifier of either the devoted and chaste, or the oppressed and victimized Indian (or sometimes even 'third world') woman.

In this essay, I will attempt to locate, within the apparent repetitions of arguments, the differences in what is at stake in the three most substantial bodies of writings on sati: the first being the colonial debate on widow immolation, the second the work of feminists working in the Western academy (both diasporic Indians and non-Indians), and the third is the spate of writings produced in India following the burning of a young woman, Roop Kanwar, in the village of Deorala, Rajasthan, in October 1987. These historical and conceptual differences, I shall suggest, are crucial to our reconceptualising the burning widow as neither an archetypal victim nor a free agent, and to analysing the interconnections between colonialism and its aftermath. In order to trace the roots and trajectories of the different ideologies and representations of widow immolation, I shall move freely between these three sets of writings.

Despite widespread references to sati, there were surprisingly few extended studies of it between Edward Thompson's well-known colonial commentary on the subject published in 1928 and the Deorala episode in 1987.<sup>4</sup> Even now, apart from Lata Mani's work, the most thought-provoking accounts have been shorter essays, although several book-length studies are now available.<sup>5</sup> Curiously too, the most prestigious historians of colonial India (either British or Indian) have not written at any length on the subject, and nor does the influential revisionist series *Subaltern Studies* deal with it.<sup>6</sup> There is no conclusive evidence for dating the origins of sati, although Romilla Thapar points out that there are growing textual references to it in the second half of the first millennium AD.<sup>7</sup> It began as a ritual confined to the Kshatriya caste (composed of rulers and warriors) and was discouraged among the highest caste of Brahmins. She suggests that it provided a heroic female counterpart to the warrior's death in battle: the argument was that the warrior's widow would then join him in heaven. The comparison between the widow who burns herself and heroic male deaths has been a recurrent feature of the discourse on sati from the earliest comments till the present day and has been used to distinguish sati from mere suicide: the argument is that the sati, like the warrior, dies positively for something, instead of negatively to escape a miserable life.<sup>8</sup> Such a comparison obviously deflects attention from the miserable fate that awaited and still threatens most Indian widows; it also led to the contention that the heroic sati feels no pain in death. Thapar suggests a correlation between the rise of sati and the decline of *niyoga* or the practice of a widow being married to her dead husband's brother; widow immolation reduced the possibilities of women marrying others within the family, or outsiders, and thus creating complications regarding inheritance. In a useful commentary on sati, Dorothy Stein points out that it was not unique to India: 'there are accounts of widow sacrifice among the Scandinavians, Slavs, Greeks, Egyptians, Chinese, Finns, Maories and some American Indians.'<sup>9</sup> This was Edward Thompson's view too: 'the rite' he says, 'belongs to a barbaric substratum which once overlay the world, including India.'<sup>10</sup> Like several others of his time (notably, for example, Rider Haggard), Thompson subscribes to the idea of a globally shared and primitive past from which Europe had emerged and from which England could liberate India too. This notion of sati being a sort of global practice is also an idea that recent writers like Ashis Nandy return to, in their attempt to read widow immolation as the result of [a universal] male anxiety about female sexuality.<sup>11</sup>

The earliest historical record of widow burning is a Greek commentary on the death of a Hindu general in a battle with the Greeks in 316 BC. The elder of his two wives was not allowed to burn because of 'her condition' (which could mean she was either pregnant or menstruating). The death of the younger one is described in some detail, especially her clothing and her ornaments, and the commentator concludes that she 'ended her life in heroic fashion.... The spectators were moved, some to pity and some to exuberant praise. But some of the Greeks present found fault with such customs

as savage and inhumane.<sup>12</sup> That this first recorded comment includes all the dominant ingredients of responses to sati till today – the fascination, the horror mingled with admiration, the voyeurism, the oscillation between regarding the widow as victim or as sovereign agent – is a measure of the representational stasis or circularity to which I earlier alluded.

The growth of colonial enterprises in India shaped the tone as well as frequency of comments by Europeans on the idea as well as the spectacle of sati.<sup>13</sup> With increasing English involvement, the accounts proliferate; simultaneously, the commentator becomes enmeshed in the scenario he describes, and the burning widow herself is progressively pictured as reaching out to the white man watching her: 'I stood close to her, she observed me attentively,' writes William Hodges;<sup>14</sup> Mandelso claims that she gives him a bracelet; Thomas Bowery receives some flowers from another's hair. By the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, the recurrent theme of what Spivak calls 'white men saving brown women from brown men' has crystallized.<sup>15</sup> Legend has it that Job Charnock, the founder of Calcutta, rescued from the flames a Brahmin widow and lived with her for fourteen years till her death; European fiction from Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* to M. M. Kaye's *The Far Pavilions* is obsessed with such rescues. Sati became, as is well known, simultaneously the moral justification for empire and an ideal of female devotion. Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* had blamed all of India's ills on the Indian male's 'manner of getting into the world and his sex-life thenceforward'. London's *New Statesman and Nation* said that the book demonstrated 'the filthy personal habits of even the most highly educated classes in India – which, like the denigration of Hindu women, are unequalled even among the most primitive African or Australian savages'.<sup>16</sup> Sati was emblematic of this denigration; at the same time, even the harshest colonial criticism included a sneaking admiration for the sati as the ideal wife who represented 'the wholly admirable sentiment and theory, that the union of man and woman is lifelong and the one permanent thing in the world'.<sup>17</sup> The idealisation of the burning widow, of course, goes back much earlier: Montaigne, for example, in his essay, 'Of Virtue', writes at length about the resolute widow, 'with a gay countenance, as if going, as she says, to sleep with her husband'.<sup>18</sup> John Master's novel about the thuggee cult, *The Deceivers*, is particularly interesting in this regard – its British hero, who is an administrator in a small district of central India, disguises himself as an Indian man to prevent his wife from committing sati. During the course of the story, this impersonation is transformed into a psychic drama whereby his British and Christian identities conflict with his passionate fascination with and seduction by the cult of thuggee and its patron goddess, Kali, so that at the end of the novel he helps the same widow to immolate herself.

These contradictory responses to sati – as a powerful male fantasy of female devotion and an instance of Hindu barbarism – both fuelled the voyeuristic fascination of the colonial gaze and impelled the narrative division, in the first half of the colonial debate on widow immolation in nineteenth-century India, of satis into good and bad ones. In the initial years of imperial rule, following their declared policy of non-interference with native religions and customs, the British made no efforts to stop the practice (although Albuquerque had prohibited it within the Portuguese territory of Goa in 1510), ostensibly because of their declared policy of non-interference in native customs and religion. The Mughal emperor Akbar disliked it and is supposed to have ridden nearly 100 miles to save the Raja of Jodhpur's daughter-in-law from burning against her will. Edward Thompson sympathised with Akbar's position – as a 'foreign' ruler, he could 'only insist that it be always voluntary'. This was precisely the nature of the first British intervention: hence the sanctioned voluntary sati was separated from the illegal coerced one, and both the idea of [Indian] woman as victim [of Hindu barbarism] and that of women as supreme devotee of man, could be maintained.

In 1813 a legislation was enacted which defined sati as legal if it met certain criteria, chief among which was that it be a voluntary act. From then on, the government's strategy was simply to make it increasingly difficult to achieve the state

of legality, hence the age, caste, and the physical state of the 'ideal' sati were increasingly regulated. One obvious implication here is that once these criteria were met, sati could be sanctioned: an implication that re-surfaced in the post-Deorala debate when pro-sati commentators insisted on the voluntary status of the true sati. It is relevant to note here that, between 1813 and 1816, it is estimated that only ten illegal sats were prevented out of a total of 400 that occurred in the Presidency of Bengal.<sup>19</sup>

Lata Mani's is the most extensive commentary on the entire colonial debate; she shows how, prior to the 1813 legislation, the colonial administration 'generated' a particular kind of information about the practice by extensively questioning pundits resident at the courts. The pundits were instructed to respond with 'a reply in conformity with the scriptures'.<sup>20</sup> In the process, a scriptural sanction and a religion tradition were constructed for a practice which had been diverse, variable and uneven. Veena Das reaches a similar conclusion: by annexing the category of 'vyavahara', or usage to the category of law, she says, 'what may have been contextual and open to interpretation, or limited to certain castes only, became frozen as "law"'.<sup>21</sup> Hence the British virtually orchestrated the articulation of a textual tradition and scriptural sanction for widow immolation, made pundits the spokesmen for a vast and heterogeneous Hindu population, and thereby calcified in new and dangerous ways the existing hierarchies of Hindu society. Because they had strategically divided sati into illegal and legal, involuntary and voluntary ones, British officials were directed to be present at each burning and tabulate its details, to see that no coercion was used. But conversely officials were sometimes reprimanded for disallowing a legal immolation!<sup>22</sup>

Following the 1813 legislation, most commentators agree, there was a sharp increase in the number of sats. From 378 in 1815, it went up to 839 in 1818. This increase spurred the movement for straightforward abolition; Raja Ram Mohan Roy published his first pamphlet on the subject, and in England there was a spate of protests. The final abolition in 1829 is regarded as a sort of landmark in the history of Indian women; commentators allot the credit for it to different people according to their own ideological positions: hence Thompson attributes it entirely to the efforts of William Bentinck, the then Governor General, as does V. N. Datta; Ashis Nandy predictably gives Roy pride of place,<sup>23</sup> and only Lata Mani traces the complex interpenetration of interests in a way that takes into account the entire spectrum of positions on this subject. Comments on the increase of sats in 1818 are also significant; many British officials simply attributed it to a cholera epidemic. Edward Thompson, like some others, read it as a sign of excessive native obedience to British law: 'I think there can be no doubt that the sanction of the Government was sometimes misrepresented as an order that widows should burn.'<sup>24</sup> Ashis Nandy interprets the increase as precisely the opposite of this, as a form of subaltern disobedience: 'the rite', he suggests, 'became popular in groups made psychologically marginal by their exposure to Western impact ... the opposition to sati constituted ... a threat to them. In their desperate defence of the rite they were also trying to defend their traditional self-esteem'.<sup>25</sup> Certain statistics seem to support such a conclusion; for example, a modification of the legislation in 1817 forbade widows of the Brahmin caste to commit sati as it was contrary to the shastras. In 1823, out of a total of 576 sats, 235 were Brahmin widows. Nandy's analysis has also been contested on the grounds that there is no easy correlation between this increase in widow burning and the 'marginalised groups' he identifies,<sup>26</sup> but it remains important for at least two reasons.

*First*, by arguing that the colonial conflict calcified indigenous patriarchal practices, Nandy's was one of the pioneering attempts to trace the multiple connections between colonial power and gender relations. Later feminist work on British India has considered in greater depth and with most sophistication how the colonial disenfranchisement of Indian men led to a situation whereby women became the grounds and signs for the colonial struggle. Indian nationalisms of different shades produced their own versions of the good Hindu wife, each of which became emblematic

of Indian-ness and tradition, a sign of rebellion against colonial authority and a symbol of the vision of the future.<sup>27</sup> In the process, women's own questioning of patriarchal authority – both indigenous and colonial – were specifically marginalised. While writings on sati have been a fruitful ground for drawing attention to the ways in which women become signifiers of the colonial conflict (and here Lata Mani provided the most detailed account), they have not sufficiently proved *why* the signs acquired the meanings they did for both Indians and the British, or considered the process whereby the divisions between masculine and feminine, public and private, active and passive, colonial and native came to acquire overlapping meanings. Such questions are necessary if one is not to assume that these terms carry universal and always already constituted meanings. Here other work on women in colonial India has been more nuanced. Rosalind O'Hanlon's essay on widows in Western India, for example, suggests that the colonial state severed 'the sphere of Hindu social relations and ritual practice from their pre-colonial incorporation within the realm of politics and state structure, and ... designate[d] them as matters of purely "social" concern'; this 'process was couched in terms of a version of contemporary Western distinctions between domains of public and private' and carried

a colonial invitation to the exercise of new kinds of power. It offered public participation in the moral and judicial discourses, many of the most intensely contested of which concerned women, through which a generalized Hindu tradition was defined, represented and made the basis not only of colonial legislation, but, in different forms, of contemporary nationalists' own efforts to construct a cultural equivalent for India as a political entity ... The employment of woman as a sign thus instituted a strong naturalizing parallelism in this particular form of detached authority: authority over a tradition whose essential qualities were characterized in terms of a feminine, and authority to pronounce upon and sometimes to determine in very real ways what should be the proper status and forms of freedom allowed to Hindu women.<sup>28</sup>

Such studies can be read as fleshing out and critiquing the skeletal connections made by Nandy. The *second* outcome of his work has not been as felicitous; it is worth tracing its somewhat involved trajectory here because it warns against the dangers of easy explanations of indigenous patriarchies as merely responses to colonial power and also because it encodes the problems – of separating colonial and post-colonial histories, and of recovering and theorizing female agency – with which I began this essay.

In 1987, following the burning of 25-year-old Roop Kanwar in Deorala, Nandy began to write in terms of a division between 'the idea of sati in mythical times and sati in historical time, between sati as event or ghatana and sati as system or pratha, between an authentic sati and an inauthentic one, between those who only respect it and those who organise it in our time', valorizing the first in each of these oppositions.<sup>29</sup> As he acknowledged, these distinctions are not his contribution to the debate; they are, we can see, a curious mixture of those made by the British and the ones offered by Indian men of different political persuasions, reformers as well as advocates of sati. Nandy evoked them, in the charged post-Deorala atmosphere, to defend what he called the ability of 'the traditional Indian' to discriminate between the ideal of the authentic sati and its corrupt contemporary manifestations.<sup>30</sup>

Nandy had, as I have pointed out, been one of the pioneers of historicising sati, of analysing sati as a form of specifiable political economic social and psychic cultures. This, ironically, was the thrust of feminist writings following the Deorala episode of 1987. Feminists insisted that the death of Roop Kanwar should be viewed not as a remnant of a feudal past but as an expression of distinctly modern economies and the contemporary denigration of women. They pointed out that huge amounts of money had been made following the murder of Roop Kanwar by those who turned the sati into a commercial spectacle involving hundreds of thousands of people; that Roop Kanwar was an educated girl, not

a simple embodiment of rural femininity (a fact that pro-sati lobbyists used to argue that it was a case of 'free choice'); and that the leaders of the pro-sati movement 'constitute a powerful regional elite' who had much to gain from constructing sati anew as emblematic of their 'tradition'.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, what was essentially a women's rights issue had been distorted into an issue of 'tradition' versus 'modernity', a struggle of the religious majority against an irreligious minority.<sup>32</sup>

Now, these are almost exactly the terms in which Lata Mani, in essays written before the Deorala incident, had described the colonial discourse on the subject. Brilliantly unravelling the rhetorical and ideological overlaps between seemingly opposed views in the debates between the colonial government, the nationalist reformers and the indigenous pro-sati lobby, Mani points out that 'the entire issue was debated within the framework of the scriptures'.<sup>33</sup> Even Indian reformers, epitomised by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, argued against sati by contending that it had no scriptural sanction and that it was custom and not the Hindu religion that had fostered the practice,

At first glance, then, it seems that little has changed between the colonial situation and 1987. But Nandy's own analytical moves – towards subscribing to a division that he had earlier analysed, and invoking an ideal of mythical sati that represents an Indian tradition, a tradition that he had earlier seen as constructed out of the tensions of colonialism – help us identify the definitive contextual shifts. His conflation of 'respect' for an ideal sati with rural India, native authenticity and the canny cultural instincts of the average Indian clearly positions him as a sophisticated example of the nativism which Gayatri Spivak has repeatedly targeted as a major pitfall for the post-colonial intellectual. It is significant that such nativism, like its earlier counterparts, bases itself on a posited notion of an ideal woman or femininity.

Significantly too, the target of Nandy's anger today is not the colonial state but Indian feminists who are seen as deculturalised, inauthentic, westernised and alienated from an appreciation of their own culture, which their village sisters embody in the act of immolating themselves. Here Nandy has a wide range of allies: Mark Tully, BBC's veteran correspondent in New Delhi, endorsed such a view. In his essay on the Deorala sati, he pitted the 'Committee for the Protection of Religion', under whose banner 100,000 Rajputs assembled in Jaipur to hear speeches calling on them to defend Hinduism against the Westernized elite, 'independent women', urban 'journalists – as fundamentalist in their blind faith in modernity as the young Rajputs were in their beliefs', against 'academics' and most significantly, against 'those feminists who jumped at the opportunity the tragedy of Deorala gave to promote their views on women's rights'.<sup>34</sup> American sociologist Patrick Harrigan too launched his defence of sati on the shoulders of an attack on westernised feminists who were out of touch, he claimed, with the sentiments of their rural sisters, who in turn were emblematic of 'Bharat Mata' or Mother India.<sup>35</sup> The conservative Hindi press spoke in similar terms, as did various pundits and sadhus.<sup>36</sup> All of them zeroed in on 'azad kism ki auratein' [types of free woman] and pitted them against archetypes of the good Hindu woman and of the present-day average/authentic rural woman. The Rajput lobby was vociferous in condemning women in trousers and with short hair who were now going to tell 'their' women what not to do. As we can see, the division between the west and India, crass materialism and spirituality, is angrily and sanctimoniously re-worked to guard against the spectre of organized women's movements.

Thus, while the post-Deorala debates seems cast entirely in the mould of the tradition/modernity dichotomy Mani speaks of, the distinctively new factor is the women's movement, a movement which has 'been the single most important factor in changing the terms of the public debate on issues like rape, domestic violence, women's employment [etc] ... if it were not for this, the incident at Deorala would not have been a national issue'.<sup>37</sup> We can unravel, via these overlaps between intellectual, religious, journalistic and other patriarchs, what it means for a writer like Nandy to

celebrate the idea of sati at a time when, not only had a widow been immolated, but the ideologies behind female immolation were being re-invoked and aggressively re-circulated. The ire against feminist makes strange bedfellows.

While discussions of the textual tradition figured after Deorala, the question of the widow's choice was at the core of all debates. The idea of the voluntary sati as an expression of a peculiarly Indian mode of femininity was repeated ad nauseam by the pro-sati lobby – contradictorily invoked both via Roop Kanwar's modern education as well as via her supposed distance from other educated Indian women. The struggle now was clearly over female volition – with feminists claiming that the entire notion of a voluntary sati is retrogressive and the pro-sati lobby insisting on the freedom of choice. This brings us to the frustrating core of past and present representations of, and debates over, sati.

For the Indian woman to be cast as Mother India and to serve a wide spectrum of political interests in colonial times, she had to be rewritten as more-than-victim. As an agent of Hindu tradition, or nationalist interests, a certain amount of volition, and even desire had to be attributed to her. This rewriting is evident in the drama of sati abolition.

Two petitions were put forward by the Indian pro-sati lobby protesting the abolition in 1828, one to the King and the second to William Bentinck, the then Governor-General. In both a death-wish on the part of the loving, faithful widow becomes the emblem of Hindu resistance to colonial law:

And on what grounds can strangers to our Faith, even though Rulers, assume the right to determine that the option which an Holy Religion thus expressly gives, shall exist no longer, and what right can they have to choose for us? ... [The widow is] the Devotee who, superior to this world, and fitted for heaven, voluntarily dies, after every means which filial affection and human consideration have vainly employed in persuasion.... the Devotee never can be persuaded from her purpose, and if prevented by force or authority she only survives a few days. [Thus abolition is] an unjust and intolerant dictation in matters of conscience.<sup>38</sup>

Here, the *desire* of the Hindu wife for her husband is accorded a recognition that is otherwise entirely absent in patriarchal discourses. Ironically but hardly surprisingly, this recognition of desire and of subjectivity, and of agency, leads to the annihilation of the woman; hence female desire is allowed but a spectacular moment, a swan's song that announces her ceasing to be.<sup>39</sup>

After the Deorala incident, it was not only the pro-sati lobby that invoked the widow's desire. The new legislations on sati introduced by the Indian Government and the Rajasthan State Government, both of which were avowedly concerned with effectively eradicating widow immolation as well as its 'glorification' implicitly cast the woman herself as agent of the crime. The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, states:

whoever attempts to commit sati and does any act towards the commission shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which shall be not less than one year but which may extend to five years and shall also be liable to a fine which shall not be less than five thousand rupees but which may also extend to twenty thousand rupees.

The widow who survives is to be punished by a prison sentence of one to five years. As Vasudha Dhagamwar, a feminist legal expert pointed out, the relevant clauses 'do not distinguish between voluntary and involuntary sati. But in effect they treat all sati as voluntary. That is why the woman is punished and that is why those who kill her are punished for abetment and not for murder.'<sup>40</sup> The invocation of female will here can be seen to work against the woman herself.

Lata Mani's central argument has been that the entire colonial debate on sati was concerned with re-defining tradition and modernity, that 'what was at stake was not women but tradition' (p. 118) and that women 'become sites on which



various versions of scripture/tradition/law are elaborated and contested' (p. 115). Hence, she argues, nowhere is the sati herself a subject of the debate, and nowhere is her subjectivity represented. Thus, we learn little or nothing about the widows themselves, or their interiority, or in fact of their pain, even from reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy.

Mani's conclusions have set the terms for subsequent work on sati, especially that which is concerned with the relationship between gender and colonialism. The critical recovery of the sati's consciousness and subjectivity has become a recurrent but fraught project, consonant with the recent preoccupation in writings on colonial discourse in general and South Asian historiography in particular with the agency of the oppressed subject.<sup>41</sup> Anand Yang laments the lack of focus on the satis themselves in existing writings, but largely repeats statistical data about the women's age, caste and region.<sup>42</sup> Gayatri Spivak, in at least three influential essays, reads the absence of women's voices in the colonial debate as representative of the difficulty of recovering subject positions in general and as indicative of the violence of colonialism and of indigenous patriarchy in particular: the discourses on sati are read as proof that 'there is no space from where the subaltern [sexed] subject can speak'.<sup>43</sup>

The silence of Spivak's subaltern is both a critique and, more disturbingly, an echo of a notoriously recurrent theme in the writings of British colonialists, Indian nationalists, Hindu orthodoxy, and indeed British feminists of the nineteenth century. The silence of Indian women enabled British feminists to claim a speaking part for themselves.<sup>44</sup> In an editorial comment in *The Storm-bell* of June 1898, Josephine Butler commented that Indian women were

indeed between the upper and nether millstone, helpless, voiceless, hopeless. Their helplessness appeals to the heart, in somewhat the same way in which the helplessness and suffering of a dumb animal does, under the knife of a vivisector. Somewhere, halfway between the Martyr Saints and the tortured 'friend of man', the noble dog, stand, it seems to me, these pitiful Indian women, girls, children, as many of them are. They have not even the small power of resistance which the western woman may have ...<sup>45</sup>

Butler and others could thus claim the necessity of representing their mute sisters, and hence legitimize themselves as 'the imperial authorities on "Indian womanhood"'.<sup>46</sup> Although she contests precisely the legacy of such politics, it is not surprising that the silence of Spivak's subaltern is a pre-condition for her own project of representation. She writes:

As Sarah Kofman has shown, the deep ambiguity of Freud's use of women as a scapegoat is a reaction-formation to an initial and continuing desire to give the hysteric a voice, to transform her into the subject of hysteria. The masculinist-imperialist ideological formation that shaped that desire into 'the daughter's seduction' is part of the same formation that constructs the monolithic 'third world woman'.... Thus, when confronted with the questions, Can the subaltern speak? and Can the subaltern (as woman) speak?, our efforts to give the subaltern a voice in history will be doubly open to the dangers run by Freud's discourse.<sup>47</sup>

Spivak contends that both Foucault and the Subaltern school of South Asian historians succumb to these dangers in trying to recover the voice of the marginalised subject. In both cases the idea of a sovereign subject creeps back and undercuts their own concerns – in the case of Foucault, s/he is imperialist, in the case of the subaltern historians, a nativist. Spivak thus signals the necessity of adapting the Gramscian maxim – 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' – by combining a philosophical scepticism about recovering any subaltern agency with a political commitment to making visible the positioning of the marginalised. Thus she makes her case for the validity of the representation of the subaltern by the post-colonial feminist intellectual:



The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘woman’ as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.<sup>48</sup>

The intellectual whom Spivak here calls to arms is almost by definition the Indian woman academic working in the metropolitan academy, a woman who must struggle against the neo-colonial impulses of that space without succumbing to the nostalgic gestures of her counterpart in the third world.

It is no accident that such a project focuses on the immolated widow, who, in Spivak’s work, becomes the ground for formulating a critique of colonialism, of indigenous patriarchy, of contemporary critical and cultural theories and of revisionist historiographies. She provides the most suitable language for talking about silence: she is, after all, a conceptual and social category that comes into being only when the subject dies. The to-be-sati is merely a widow, the sati is by definition a silenced subject. Caught between the notion of representation that comes too easily, as in the case of the nineteenth-century British feminists, and another that recognises its contingencies and difficulties, like Spivak’s, the Indian woman remains silent: she still ‘cannot speak’. An insistence on subaltern silence is disquieting for those who are engaged in precisely the task of recovering such voices; it can be linked to Spivak’s curious detachment, in these essays, from the specificities of post-colonial politics. But her argument for the validity, indeed necessity, of representation ironically takes on, as I hope to show below, a specially urgent resonance in the very arena she does not address: the struggles of third world feminists in their own countries, and in this case, India.

From the earliest commentaries onwards, only two options are offered for the dead widow: she either wanted to die or was forced to. Each option marks a dead end for feminist investigations. In the first case, we are dangerously close to the ‘radiant heroism’ of the willing widow which is suggested by both British and Indian male commentators. In the second case, fears have been voiced that if we refuse to ‘grant sati the dubious status of existential suicide’ we will find ourselves ‘in another bind, that of viewing the sati as inexorably a victim and thereby emptying her subjectivity of any function or agency’.<sup>49</sup> Edward Thompson, in a section called ‘The Psychology of the “Satis” easily combined both ideas:

I had intended to try and examine this; but the truth is, it has ceased to be a puzzle to me. Obviously the mental state of the women who were sacrificed varied infinitely, as that of martyrs for religion or patriotism. The Rajput lady who died when a foe girdled her city and her whole sex was swept away, or who ascended the pyre with her lord newly slain in battle, was in a mood that had no contact or resemblance with the mood of the cowed and unwilling slave-girl.<sup>50</sup>

In those essays where Lata Mani uncovers the common ground on which dichotomies between willing and unwilling satis were constructed, she declares that she herself is ‘not concerned here with what the practice of sati meant to those who undertook it’, suggesting in a footnote that we turn to Ashis Nandy’s essay, which, however, does not concern itself at all with the points of view of satis or would-be satis.<sup>51</sup> It seems to me that, until very recently, Mani was unable to proceed significantly beyond Edward Thompson’s dichotomies.<sup>52</sup> Thompson, to give credit where it is due, speaks at length about how societies construct desire – whether this be manifested as the devotion of the sati or in the patriotism of soldiers. In fact, in the aftermath of Deorala, Thompson’s rhetoric sounded less offensive than that of the pro-sati lobby which, as I earlier mentioned, harped in different ways about the free-will of the authentic sati. In the context where

feminist-bashing poised itself precisely on the question of free-will, formulations such as Lata Mani's that 'the volition of some widows can justifiably be seen as equal to the resistance of others' had a rather disturbing resonance.<sup>53</sup> Feminists in India, I should note here, have repeatedly stressed that 'there is no such things as a voluntary sati'.<sup>54</sup>

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan attempts to break this impasse by drawing on Elaine Scarry's work on the 'radical subjectivity' of pain.<sup>55</sup> Arguing that neither colonial commentators, nor Indian reformers, nor even the feminist work on sati have sufficiently focused on the pain of the dying woman, and showing also how the pro-sati lobby has always insisted that the sati feels none. Sunder Rajan claims that 'an inherent resistance to pain is what impels the individual or collective suffering subject towards freedom. It is therefore as one who acts/reacts, rather than as one who invites assistance, that one must regard the subject in pain' (p. 9). A recent essay by Lata Mani can be read as in dialogue with Sunder Rajan and other feminists working in India.<sup>56</sup> Mani now mines colonial eyewitness accounts of widow burning for signs of the struggles and vacillations of potential sats and shows how pain may impel a woman to try to escape the pyre, contrary to her own earlier resolution to die. She thereby moves beyond her earlier notion of 'complex subjectivity' for sats, which had seemed to merely oscillate between various static states of being. Significantly, she now clearly states that there is no such things as a voluntary sati and is anxious, too, that we avoid 'globalizing the local ... granting colonialism more power than it achieved'. She wants also to 'make sure that the things in my work that speak to the context of the U.S. are not ... counter-productive in the struggle of progressives in India'.<sup>57</sup> Such a note is rare in work on colonial discourse within the Western academy and it leads Lata Mani to a crucial reformulation:

The question 'can the subaltern speak?' then, is better posed as a series of questions: Which groups constitute the subalterns in any text? What is their relationship to each other? How can they be heard to be speaking or not speaking in a given set of materials? With what effects? Rephrasing the question in this way enables us to retain Spivak's insight regarding the positioning of women in colonial discourse *without conceding to colonial discourse what it, in fact, did not achieve – the erasure of women*.<sup>58</sup>

Let me attempt to answer these questions by returning to the question of the subaltern's experience and her pain as they figure in Sunder Rajan's essay, which searches the postcolonial discourse on sati for representations of the widow's pain. Analysing the law, the media, feminist analyses, and the Indian women's movement, she finds that the pain of the sati is represented only in 'forms of agitprop representations in theatre, film and posters' which bring 'us closer to the "reality" of sati than does either the liberal discourse denouncing it or the popular and religious discourse glorifying it' (p. 16). It is significant, I think, that an essay which begins with an inquiry into subjectivity and the individual subject ends up with what in fact is one of the most succinct accounts of the political situation after the Deorala sati. Sunder Rajan discusses how the Indian media and others writing on the Deorala incident persistently attempted to reconstruct the subjectivity of Roop Kanwar, and shows how the assumption that the 'answer to such a complex mystery is to be sought in knowing the sati herself, leads all too often to a closure of analysis, her death creating a condition of definitional unknowability'.<sup>59</sup> She herself is forced to conclude 'that an exclusive focus on choice and motivation in constructing the subjectivity of the sati in some representations leads either to mystification or to cognitive closure'. I say she is 'forced to conclude' because Sunder Rajan does not draw out the implications of her own work. Why is it that a project which seeks to unravel subjectivity ends up by describing, and by valorising (albeit somewhat uneasily) the representation of sati in agitprop posters and by social movements?

Even though I find her use of the subject-in-pain model somewhat problematic, I think Sunder Rajan's essay is crucial in implicitly moving towards a collective subjectivity of agents – in this case this would not be a collectivity of sats or

even of widows but rather of huge, if not all, sections of Indian women who suffer from the consequences of the ideology of sati. I would like to suggest that ‘the subaltern’ ‘in the text of sati’, if we must locate one, cannot be understood simply as the immolated widow. The sati is produced by and functions to recirculate ideologies which target and seek to position a larger body of women, whose experiences, articulations and silences are crucial to understanding the relations of power and insubordination which are central to any analysis of ‘the subaltern’.

It is entirely true that to focus on the pain of the burning widow is at once to draw attention to the shared indifference to women on the part of both defenders and abolitionists of sati, then and now, and to remind ourselves that sati is not just a symbol and a figuration, but a tortuous experience. However, recovering that experience, or locating agency within the temporal and experiential boundaries of the act of widow immolation is fraught with the dangers of succumbing to its grotesque power and its ideal authenticity at the expense of understanding how and why it is produced in the first place. Joan Scott’s critique of ‘experience’ as a foundational historical category is useful in drawing attention to the dangers of Scarry’s epistemology of pain even when it is used as cautiously as it is by Sunder Rajan. Scott points out that

experience works as a foundation providing both a starting point and a conclusive kind of explanation, beyond which few questions need to or can be asked. And yet it is precisely the questions precluded – questions about discourse, difference and subjectivity, as well as about what counts as experience and who gets to make that determination – that would enable us to historicize experience, to reflect critically on the history we write about it, rather than to premise our history upon it.<sup>60</sup>

If we are not to take either identity or experience for granted, we should look at how they are ‘ascribed, resisted or embraced’, she writes.

Such an exercise points to several directions in which work on sati still needs to be done. Colonial accounts voyeuristically focus on the spectacle of burning and obsessively describe the beautiful young widow as she strips herself of clothes and ornaments to ascend the fire.<sup>61</sup> An alternative view that exposes the pain and ugliness of the event must also guard against sealing it off from what precedes or follows it. The sati’s experience is not limited to the pain of a death: a whole life is brought to the violence of that event, which, if unpacked, can be seen as constructed – not just crudely by her fears of a miserable life as a widow, not just by familial economic designs on her property, not even by male anxieties about her sexuality, but by social and ideological interactions, pressures and configurations that connect her immediate situation to the politics of her community, and indeed of the nation, and to the crucial articulations of gender within each of them. Some feminist work produced in India has been moving towards making these connections visible. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid have meticulously documented specific cases of sati and delineated their ‘contexts’.<sup>62</sup> Their writings certainly speculate on the ideologies that connect one burning to another, but they also focus on what was at stake in staging each immolation.

To use the word ‘staging’ is problematic in as much as it might be seen to deny the part played by the individual psyche and drives in enabling the violence of a sati. Such a denial is, unfortunately, emblematic of much feminist work produced in India, and elsewhere I touch upon how it is sometimes produced by a suspicion of ‘western feminist theory’ which is thereby flattened out and cast entirely as ‘liberal-humanist’ or as focussing on the psychic, the sexual and the individual at the expense of the political and the social.<sup>63</sup> This is not the space to discuss the debilitating effects of recasting a divide between the East and the West on the grounds of feminist studies, although it should be obvious that such a dichotomy works to the detriment of nuanced understandings of gender politics anywhere. There is no necessary contradiction between focusing on the social and the psychic: Jacqueline Rose has pointed out that ‘ideology is effective

... because it works at the most rudimentary levels of psychic identity and its drives'.<sup>64</sup> In such an understanding, the individual psyche and the social exist in a constitutive, *traumatic*, reciprocity; the violence and pathologies of the one being symptomatic of the other. In the case of sati, this violent reciprocity is the reason why 'choice' has no meaning apart from its multiple determinations. Sangari and Vaid do not address this traumatic relation, but they do point out the ways in which the widow's desire is understood only when it is expressed as a willingness to die. Hence the sati's 'power' lies in her will to die and comes into being only when she expresses that will.<sup>65</sup> Therefore it is visible only when it is compliant with dominant ideologies.

The 1987 episode of sati was particularly frightening for feminists in India precisely because it was embedded within a context in which various types of murders are constructed as questions of female choice. When wives are burnt for dowry it is alleged that they committed suicide. The systematic abortion of female fetuses in contemporary India, it has been argued, is only a question of 'choice' on the part of the mothers-to-be. The debate over these amniocentesis-determined abortions also highlights the dubious status of women's experience and of a feminist politics that valorises it.<sup>66</sup> Then there was the case of Shahbano, where the elderly Muslim divorcee petitioned the courts for alimony, a right granted by the civil code of the country but not by the Muslim personal Law. When she won the case, Muslim fundamentalists forced her to withdraw her petition in the name of her religion. It was then argued that women's groups had no right to petition further since the individual woman had made her choice. These groups, however, continued to 'represent', not Shahbano the individual, but the politics of gender and of community identity which the case had thrown up.<sup>67</sup> All of these issues were articulated, by communal, nationalist or patriarchal voices, as issues of female and individual choice. In each of them, such a formulation pushed for a cognitive and discursive closure that would protect existing inequalities for women, or create new ones. And in each case, feminists had to insist on their right to represent other women, although they did not speak merely *for* the subaltern as much as insist that much was at stake for women's groups, for larger bodies of women, and for the Indian polity at large.<sup>68</sup>

The debate on sati, then, signals the need to take into account two sorts of collective subjects in order to reposition the individual subject within them – the first is the collectivity of women at large, and the second a politically organised collectivity of women. The first would highlight that, despite its spectacular nature, the sati is not an isolated event; the second would indicate the ways in which female agency is wrought out of precariously achieved political intervention. Taken together, the two collectives do not seek to bypass, devalue or erase the suffering, the pain or the determinations of the individual subject. They do, however, extend Spivak's notion of representation: the 'truth' about Roop Kanwar is not exclusively or best represented by the post-colonial feminist intellectual, but by an intersection of the two collectivities mentioned above. In the post-Deorala debates, statements by rural women showed that they often believed in sati as a possibility even as they questioned that Roop Kanwar was a 'true' sati. But at the same time, they questioned various aspects of women's oppression in India, and showed an awareness of women's movements even when these had not touched their own lives.<sup>69</sup>

Such an exercise, of listening to other women's voices to position the individual sati, and of detailing the individual circumstances and nuances of each immolation, is obviously easier to attempt in the present context. But I want to suggest here that if we look back, from the vantage point of a contemporary widespread backlash against the women's movement, at the bedfellows of the colonial controversy, and find that women are somehow erased there, we should not simply suppose that they were merely the grounds on which other concerns were articulated. We may modify Lata Mani's conclusions to suggest that women were, *then as now*, the targets as well as the grounds of the debates over transition.

This, however, calls for us to *suppose a presence which at first cannot be found* an exercise that Spivak critically endorses in the case of the subaltern school of Indian historians. If women are and have always been at stake, we must look for them, both within discourses which seek to erase their self-representation and elsewhere. The writings of women who worked alongside, within or in opposition to the nationalist movements are increasingly becoming available for feminist scholars and invaluable in understanding what was at stake in nineteenth-century widow immolations.<sup>70</sup> These writings help us understand that the debate over tradition and modernity did not merely use *woman* as a 'site', but specifically targeted those who challenged or critiqued the patriarchal underpinnings of nationalist discourses. The more feminist research uncovers these hitherto hidden and erased voices, the clearer it becomes that the precursors of today's feminists, as individuals and as a potential collectivity, constituted a threat and were thus at least partially the target of earlier rewritings of 'tradition'. The bitter lessons of the present resurgence of communalism in India should make this easier to understand. Today, Hindu communalism does not simply resort to the image of a traditional, passive woman but offers its own versions of militant womanhood to counter those produced by feminist struggles.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the latest ironic manifestation of this is the fact that the most aggressive and masculist face of recent Hindu communalism is embodied by two women leaders, Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati.<sup>72</sup> Communalism articulates itself as both traditional and modern, and so does nationalism; both tradition and modernity are thus fluid terms, invoked freely to serve specific class and gender interests.

I have been arguing that we can re-position the sati by looking not just at the widow who died but at those who survived to tell the tale. This tale, however, will only underline that subaltern agency, either at the individual level or at the collective, cannot be idealised as pure opposition to the order it opposes; it works both within that order and displays its own contradictions. Finally, identity is not just a matter of self-perception. In an article called *The Plight of Hindu Widows as Described by a Widow Herself*, which first appeared in *The Gospel of All Lands* in April 1889, the writer describes the misery of a wife following the death of her husband:

None of her relatives will touch her to take her ornaments off her body. That task is assigned to three women from the barber caste ... those female fiends literally jump all over her and violently tear all the ornaments from her nose, ears etc. In that rush, the delicate bones of the nose and ear are sometimes broken. Sometimes ... tufts of hair are also plucked off ... At some times grief crashes down on the poor woman from all sides ... there is nothing in our fate but suffering from birth to death. When our husbands are alive, we are their slaves; when they die, our fate is even worse ... Thousands of widows die after a husband's death. But far more have to suffer worse fates throughout their lives if they stay alive. Once, a widow who was a relative of mine died in front of me. She had fallen ill before her husband died. When he died, she was so weak that she could not even be dragged to her husband's cremation. She had a burning fever. Then her mother-in-law dragged her down from the cot onto the ground and ordered the servant to pour bucketfuls of cold water over her. After some eight hours, she died. But nobody came to see how she was when she was dying of the cold. After she died, however, they started praising her, saying she had died for the love of her husband ... If all [such] tales are put together they would make a large book. The British government put a ban on the custom of sati, but as a result of that several women who could have died a cruel but quick death when their husbands died now have to face an agonizingly slow death.<sup>73</sup>

The widows in this narrative come close to those constructed by colonial records and accounts. The speaker herself offers a functionalist explanation of the sati's desire to die. And yet, she herself, a potential sati, did not die. In speaking, she reveals not just a tremulous or vacillating subjectivity but an awareness of the traumatic constructedness of one's own 'experience'. Identity is both self-constructed, and constructed for us.

To conclude, feminist theory is still working out the connections between social determinations and individual subjectivity. The work on sati demonstrates how the contexts of utterance and intervention still determine which of these two will be stressed, but it also marks a space where a fruitful dialogue has begun to emerge. Widow immolation is thus neither the burning of the exceptional woman nor the sign of the special devotion/victimisation of the average Indian or 'third world' woman; in becoming a vanishing point for a theory of female subjectivity, it signals both worthwhile directions in which revisionist histories of Indian women and theories of subaltern agency might move, and the problems they will encounter.

## NOTES

1. I would like to thank Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Rukun Advani for their generous help with materials; Nivedita Menon, Priyamvada Gopal and Andrew Parker for their responses and, above all, Suvir Kaul for his extensive comments and his illuminating editorial pencil. I use the term 'sati', which has itself been the subject of much debate, for the act as well as the practice of widow immolation, as well as for the woman who dies. Colonial writings spelt it as 'suttee'; and, recently, Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari 'use the words "widow immolation" to designate the primary violence and the word "sati" to indicate those structures of belief and ideology which gain consent for widow immolation', 'Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies: Widow Immolation in Contemporary Rajasthan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXVI, no. 17, April 27 1991, p. WS-3. 'Dead women tell no tales' in my title refers both to Pamela Philipose and Teesta Setalvad's casual use of the phrase ('Demystifying Sati', *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, March 13 1988, p. 41) and to the obsession of the dead widow's desire in discourses on sati.
2. Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India', in *Recasting Women* Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), New Delhi, 1989, p. 126 n. 97.
3. For an elaboration of this argument, see my 'Overworking the "third world"', *Oxford Literary Review*, 3: 1-2, 1991, pp. 164-92.
4. Edward Thompson, *Suttee: A Historical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow-Burning*, 1928.
5. See, for example, Arvind Shama, *Sati, Historical and Phenomenological Essays*, Delhi, 1988; VN Datta, *Sati: a Historical, Social and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow Burning*, New Delhi, 1988. I have been unable to review *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse; The Burning of Wives in India*, John Stratton Hawley (ed.), New York, 1993.
6. *Subaltern Studies*, Vols 1-8, Ranajit Guha (ed.), Delhi, 1982-92.
7. Romila Thapar, 'Traditions Versus Misconceptions', in *Manushi*, no. 42-3, 1987, p. 8. See also her essay, 'In History', in *Seminar*, no. 342 ('Sati: a symposium on widow immolation and its social contexts'), February 1988, pp. 14-19.
8. Dorothy K. Stein, 'Women to Burn: Suttee as a Normative Institution', *Signs*, 4: 2, 1978, argues that the difference between satis and warriors is the narrowness of the cause for which the women die. Feminists in India have, instead, repeatedly stressed that the difference lies in the fact that the group from which satis are drawn is marginalised and oppressed, unlike the group from which soldiers are produced.



9. Ibid., p. 253.
10. Edward Thompson, *Suttee*, p. 26.
11. Ashis Nandy, 'Sati: A Nineteenth Century Tale of Women, Violence and Protest', in *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture*, Delhi, 1980, pp. 1–31.
12. Quoted by Arvind Sharma, pp. 2–3. This episode is referred to by many commentators, including Thompson and Stein.
13. A translation of 'M. Caesar Fredericke [Federici], Marchant of Venice' in 1558 describes with puzzlement the Indian women who 'so wilfully burne themselves against nature and law' (quoted by Thomas Hahn, 'Indians East and West: primi-tivism and savagery in English discovery narratives of the sixteenth century', *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 8: 1, 1978, p. 103). The (16th-century) Jesuit missionary de Nobili was impressed 'by the ecstatic devotion with which many of these young widows went to their deaths'.
14. Quoted in Lata Mani, 'Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning', in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, New York and London, 1992, p. 400.
15. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana and Chicago, 1988, p. 297.
16. Katherine Mayo, *Mother India*, New York, 1927, p. 22; the review is quoted by Rama Joshi and Joanne Liddle, *Daughters of Interdependence: Gender, Caste and Class in India*, 1986, p. 31.
17. George Macmun, *The Religious and Hidden Cults of India*, 1931, p. 174.
18. 'Of Virtue', in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, translated by Donald M. Frame, Stanford, 1958, p. 535.
19. Vasudha Dhagamwar, 'Saint, Victim or Criminal', *Seminar*, no. 342, Feb. 1988, p. 35.
20. Mani, 'Contentious Traditions' p. 98. One example is worth quoting in detail:

The question posed to the pundit was whether sati was enjoined by scriptural texts. The pundit responded that the texts did not enjoin but merely permitted sati in certain instances ... Nevertheless based on this response the Nizamat Adalat concluded that 'The practice, generally speaking, being thus recognized and *encouraged* by the doctrines of the Hindoo religion, it appears evident that the course which the British government should follow, according to the principle of religious tolerance ... is to allow the practice in those cases in which it is countenanced by their religion; and to prevent it in others in which it is by the same authority prohibited (p. 99).

21. Veena Das, 'Strange Response', *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, February 28 1988, p. 31. See also her 'Gender Studies, Cross-cultural Comparisons and the Colonial Organization of Knowledge', *Berkshire Review*, 21 (1986), pp. 58–76.
22. The *Calcutta Review* commented that 'the Government and the Sudder Court were, in fact, getting into a dilemma by attempting to introduce justice and law into what was, in itself, the highest kind of illegality, the most palpable injustice and the most revolting cruelty (Thompson, *Suttee*, p. 65).
23. Ashis Nandy, 'Sati', pp. 1–31.
24. Thompson, *Suttee*, p. 65. The presence of British officers at the immolations are supposed to have 'thrown the ideas of the Hindoos upon the subject into a complete state of confusion', according to one Mr. C. Smith, a second judge of the Sudder Court, '... they conceive our power and our will to be commensurable' (pp. 64–5). The ironies attendant upon policing sati do not stop there: in 1987, the Indian government passed The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act which sought to intensify the existing ban on sati by outlawing its spectacle: hence witnessing a sati became a potential abetment of the crime. Ironically, where the British half-measure necessitated that each sati event be policed, watched, observed and documented, the latest act has led to a paradoxical situation where surveillance is



criminal; now, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has acutely observed, to report sati is to render oneself vulnerable to law so that today, when a woman dies, a 'collective amnesia' suggests that 'her death never occurred', 'The Subject of Sati: Pain and Death in the Contemporary Discourse on Sati', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 3: 2, 1990, p. 13.

25. Nandy, 'Sati', p. 7.
26. Anand Yang, 'Whose Sati? Widow Burning in Early 19th Century India', *Journal of Women's History*, pp. 19–21; Sanjukta Gupta and Richard Gombrich, 'Another View of Widow-Burning and Womanliness in Indian Public Culture', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 22, 1984, p. 256. But the later article also endorses the tired (and potentially communal) claim that the Hindu emphasis on chastity was a consequence of the Muslim threat to the purity of Hindu women (pp. 255–6).
27. See for example, Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' in *Recasting Women*, pp. 233–53.
28. Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Issues of Widowhood in Colonial Western India', in *Contesting Power, Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, edited by Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, Delhi, 1991, p. 77–9.
29. Ashis Nandy 'The Human Factor', *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, January 17 1988, p. 22.
30. Here Nandy claimed Rabindranath Tagore as an illustrious predecessor in severing the 'idea' of sati from the practice, and also extensively referred to Anand Coomaraswamy's notorious defense of sati in his influential book *The Dance of Shiva*.
31. It is significant that now the tradition or culture being defended by the pro-sati lobby was that of the Rajputs, whereas once the pan-Indian-ness of sati was stressed. Of course, in this instance, the 'Rajput' become encoded as the essence of Indian-ness.
32. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, 'The Burning of Roop Kanwar', *Manushi*, no. 42–3, 1987, p. 16. See also Sudesh Vaid, 'The Politics of Widow Immolation', *Seminar*, no. 342, February 1988, pp. 20–3.
33. Mani, 'Contentious Traditions', p. 110.
34. Mark Tully, 'The Deorala Sati', in *No Full Stops in India*, pp. 210–36.
35. 'Tyranny of the Elect? Bringing Bharat Mata Up to Date', *Statesman*, Delhi edition, Nov. 5 1987.
36. For an analysis of some of these positions, see Kumkum Sangari, 'Perpetuating the Myth', *Seminar*, no. 342, Feb. 1988, pp. 24–30.
37. Pamela Philipose and Teesta Setalvad, 'Demystifying Sati', p. 41.
38. Quoted by Stein in 'Women to Burn', pp. 260–1.
39. In contemporary pro-sati discourses, the sati is repeatedly spoken of in terms of her love for her husband, a love whose everyday expression is subjection and service to him and which is marked by a consistent erasure of the self. All other forms of female desire are, within such discourses, repellant and abnormal.
40. Dhagamwar, 'Saint, Criminal or Victim', p. 38.
41. Rosalind O'Hanlon's essay, 'Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22:1, 1988, pp. 189–224, perceptively reviews these materials.
42. Anand Yang, 'Whose Sati?' pp. 8–33 and 'The Many Faces of Sati in The Early Nineteenth Century', *Manushi*, no. 42–3, 1987, pp. 26–9.
43. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice', *Wedge*, Winter/Spring 1985, pp. 120–30, p. 120, and p. 129. The other two essays are, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, pp. 271–313 and 'The Rani of Sirmur', *History and Theory*, 24: 3, 1987, pp. 247–72.
44. Antoinette M. Burton, 'The White Woman's Burden, British Feminists and "The Indian Woman", 1865–1915', in *Western Women and Imperialism* edited by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, Bloomington, 1992, pp. 137–57,

suggests that feminists in Britain constructed 'the Indian woman' as a foil against which to gauge their own progress; for them empire was an integral and enabling part of 'the woman question' (p. 139). See also Barbara N. Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminists Allies, British Women Activists in India, 1865–1945' in the same volume, pp. 119–36.

45. Burton, 'The White Woman's Burden', p. 144.
46. Ibid., p. 148.
47. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p. 296.
48. Ibid., p. 308. See also her 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Hystoiography' in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society* edited by Ranajit Guha, Delhi, 1985.
49. Sunder Rajan, 'The Subject of Sati', p. 5.
50. Thompson, *Suttee*, 137–8.
51. Mani, 'Contentious Traditions', p. 92.
52. Mani writes: 'It is difficult to know how to interpret these accounts, for we have no independent access to the mental or subjective states of widows outside of these overdetermined colonial representations of them. In any case, the meaning of consent in a patriarchal context is hard to assess. Still, it is fair to assume that the mental states of widows were complex and inconsistent. Some widows were undoubtedly coerced: the decisions of others would be difficult to reduce to "force".' ('Contentious Traditions').
53. Mani, 'Contentious Traditions', *Cultural Critique*, no. 7, fall 1987, p. 97. This sentence was, significantly, dropped in later versions; Loomba, 'Overworking', p. 187.
54. See, for example, Kumkum Sangari, 'There is no such thing as voluntary sati', *The Times of India*, Sunday Review, Oct. 25 1987.
55. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York and Oxford, 1985.
56. Lata Mani, 'Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning, in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler, (eds) *Cultural Studies*, New York and London, 1992, pp. 392–408.
57. Ibid., p. 408. See also Mani's discussion of the different resonances of her work in the US, in India and in Britain in 'Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception', *Feminist Review*, no. 36, 1989, pp. 21–41.
58. Mani, 'Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts', p. 403.
59. Sunder Rajan, 'The Subject of Sati', p. 14.
60. Joan Scott, 'Experience', in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York and London, 1992, p. 33.
61. Satis were of course not always or even mostly the nubile young things they are portrayed as in such accounts, as Anand Yang and Lata Mani both indicate.
62. See Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari, 'Sati in Modern India: A 'Report'', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16: 31, August 1 1981, pp. 1284–88, and 'Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies, Widow Immolation in Contemporary Rajasthan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26: 17, April 27 1991, pp. WS-2-WS-18.
63. 'The feminine mystique unveiled', *The Indian Express*, Sunday Magazine, August 25 1991.
64. Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, 1986, p. 5.
65. The relationship between 'will' and 'willingness' is worth considering in this context.
66. See Nivedita Menon, 'Abortion and the Law: Problems for Feminism', *Canadian journal of Women and the Law*, 6: 1, 1993, pp. 103–18.

67. The silence of Shahbano did not stifle the voices of Indian women on the subject of religion, the state and the female subject. See Zakia Pathak and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, 'Shahbano' in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, pp. 257–79.
68. 'Their pain from the sati incident', concluded Veena Das 'stems from the manner in which they see their own lives as intrinsically bound with the lives of women such as Roop Kanwar', 'Strange Response', p. 31.
69. See Kavita, Shobha, Shobita, Kanchan and Sharad, 'Rural Women Speak', *Seminar*, no. 342, February 1988, pp. 40–4.
70. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, Volume 1, New Delhi, 1991 and Volume 2, New York, 1993 are valuable recent resources for feminists working in this area.
71. See Tanika Sarkar, 'The Woman as Communal Subject', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26: 35, August 1991, pp. 2057–67.
72. See Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar and Sambuddha Sen, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*, New Delhi, 1993. But this issue needs deeper analysis, as do the images of femininity and female militancy among the Indian left.
73. Basu, et al., *Women Writing in India*, pp. 359–63.

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