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# De-/Re-constructing Orientalism: A (Re)discovery of Subalternities in Depictions of Sati in Early Modern European Travel Narratives

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## Abstract

*The sentence "white men are saving brown women from brown men" has become controversially iconic since the publication of the post-colonial theorist GayatriChakravortySpivak's provocative essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in which she draws attention to the problem of the double subalternity imposed on the colonised female by the "epistemic violence" of both imperialism and patriarchy. This paper, in an attempt to critically engage with Spivak's claim, selects and analyses three pieces of textual materials about sati from early modern travel narratives (c. 1500- c.1800) to argue for a more complex, subtle, as well as contextualised reading of the rather ambiguous and ambivalent encounters of the Orient and the Occident, of India and Europe.*

## Introduction

The sentence "white men are saving brown women from brown men"[i] has become controversially iconic since the publication of the post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak's provocative essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in which she draws attention to the problem of the double subalternity imposed on the colonised female by the "epistemic violence"[ii] of both imperialism and patriarchy. She claims that the silenced subaltern's agency is forever lost in an eternal entrapment, or "the deep shadow"[iii], due to the invincible "executive force"[iv], namely the representational power, of the orientalist discourse in its necessary search for an "identity-in-differential"[v]. To illustrate the mechanisms of this silencing ventriloquism embedded in the rescue spirit of the sentence, Spivak uses the debate surrounding the British/European abolition of the Hindu practice of sati (widow-burning) as an example. She has noticed that neither the white men, in their, ironically, equally patriarchal civilizing mission against the accused patriarchal savagery of the brown men, nor the brown men themselves, in their dismissive nativist statement—"the women wanted to die"[vi], take into account the voice of the subject of their competing discourses, and thus both

transfix/subjugate the female subaltern onto/into a passive position of a discursively constructable object.

However, although Spivak's detailed focus on the intersection/superimposition of race and gender definitely contributes to the further exploration into the heterogeneity of orientalist discourses, her theory has nonetheless perpetuated the lopsided propensity of some post-colonial scholarship on orientalism towards an overemphasis on the influence and control exerted on the Other by the European metropole. As Bart Moore-Gilbert[vii] has pointed out, Said's concrete analyses of orientalism prove to be largely homogenised in their suppression of diverse socio-historical and geo-cultural differences within the colonial discourse. Therefore, just as Said[viii] himself emphasises in his theory about the interconnections between the orientalisation of the Other and the formation of the Self, it is of critical significance to be both cautious about the heterogeneity of this Self as European society, and perspicacious about the "reverse traffic"[ix], namely the influence, no matter how subtle or mediated, the Other has over the Self, generated by the multi-directional and porous nature of such intercultural crossings.

Therefore, this essay, in an attempt to critically engage with Spivak's claim, selects and analyses three pieces of textual materials about sati from early modern travel narratives (c. 1500- c.1800) to argue for a more complex, subtle, as well as contextualised reading of the rather ambiguous and ambivalent encounters of the Orient and the Occident, of India and Europe. The first part will use the eye-witness accounts of sati by Ludovico di Varthema[x] and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier[xi] to uncover the heterogeneity of the European self in its complex recollection, refraction and reflection of multiple forms of domestic and oversea subalternities. It argues that what Spivak has neglected is the subaltern position occupied by the white/European women in the whole orientalist mechanism of silencing/erasing. To demonstrate not only the diversity but also the diachronic changes of European retellings of sati, part two will then explore how Enlightenment writers, Voltaire[xii] in particular, infuse various fictional, satirical, and allegorical elements into their mythical narratives in an increasingly anxious Europe and its abstraction of India. Through these discussions, it will become clear that some post-colonial frameworks' tendency to generalise, over-simplify and mislabel pre-colonial European travel narratives as a sort of manifestation of proto-colonial ideological patterns should be avoided by careful investigations of the veritable particularities associated with different writers' socio-historical backgrounds and political-cultural agendas.

## Part 1: Patriarchal Porosity—the Ventriloquised Dialogue between the Silenced Subaltern and the Invisible Subaltern

Modern historians have long made the point that European colonisation happened more in the form of accident than design.[xiii] Miscellaneousness characterised the commercial and cultural

communications that had always been there, while the standard orientalist colonial model of engagement only came about after state authorities started appreciating not only the economic but also the geo-strategic significance of the colonies in an increasingly competitive manner. Therefore, in order to avoid imposing a future obsession over the imperial formation upon pre-colonial travel narratives, the categorisation-resistant nature of such narratives, as well as their shifting and sometimes (self-)contradictory tendencies, should be noted. Among this miscellany, the eye-witness accounts of the Italian traveller Varthema and the French merchant Tavernier prove to be particularly indicative of the ways sati affected and shaped European consciousness, of which this essay addresses the major one linked to dealings of femininity: the vacillation between repulsion and admiration, between the sati's coercive nature as a practice and the sati's questionable agency as a person.

On one hand, both Varthema and Tavernier's gazes upon the burning sati are simultaneously repulsive and sympathetic. Such unique mixture of emotions are revealed in their allusions towards the coercive elements in the rite, among which both accounts have highlighted three. The first is the use of narcotics: "and then the said wife, when the feast is prepared, eats **a great deal of betel**, and eats so much that she **loses her wits**..."[xiv] and "that to take away the fears of death...the Priests do give her **a certain beverage to stupefy and disorder** the senses, which takes from her all apprehension of her preparations for death..."[xv]. The second is imposed/internalised social pressure: "if the said wife were not to do this, she would be held in like estimation as a **public prostitute** is among us, and her relations would put her to death..."[xvi] and "(once a widow)...all the rest of her life she lives slighted and despised...the unfortunate condition causes them to hate life, so that they rather choose to be buried alive...than to live **the scorn and contempt** of all the world..."[xvii]. Finally, the third is accused on the heathenish hegemony and demonic treachery of the Brahmins: "men clothed like **devils**, who carry fire in their mouths...offer a sacrifice to the Deumo..."[xviii]; "...the Brahmins **make them believe**, that in dying after that manner, they shall revive again with him (the husband) in another world, with more honour and advantages than they enjoyed before..."[xix]; "...resting her back against a pillar, to which the **Brahmin ties her** about the middle, for fear she should run away when she feels the fire..."[xx]; and "...the woman standing with her back to the fire, is **pushed into by** the Brahmins..."[xxi]. As is clear, such mixture of emotions is the product of the travellers' implicitly condescending symbolisation of the faceless and nameless sati as the virtuous and innocent victim of indigenous religious savagery.

On the other hand, in a quite self-contradictory manner, both accounts have addressed the will and agency of the sati, with their narratives exuding a sense of admiration and valourisation for the "true wife"'s (sati's original meaning in Sanskrit[xxii]) chastity and heroic self-sacrifice: "do not imagine, however, that she is unwilling to do this; she even imagines

that she shall be carried forthwith into heaven. And thus running violently of her own free will, she...**throws herself into** the midst of the fire"[xxiii]; "...she had washed the body that stank abominably, and had afterwords washed herself, she was burnt with him with an **admirable constancy**..."[xxiv]; and "...a piece of Tassata, which she puts between her own belly, and the body of her husband, **bidding them** to set fire to the pile..."[xxv]. In such vacillation between the travellers' repulsion towards coercion and admiration towards agency, Banerjee[xxvi] has identified the haunting voices of white women, regardless of their absence from the narratives. Combining the Freudian concept of uncanny and Foucault's theory about the eluded familiarity, she states that early modern European travellers had deliberately avoided making explicit connections between the repulsive side of sati and the witch-burning prevalent in contemporaneous Europe while implicitly building a dialogic osmosis linking the admirable side of the Indian sati to emerging European standards of femininity[xxvii].

Indeed, close examinations of Varthema and Tavernier's languages in their accounts would help uncover the similarities between sati and witch-burning as forms of gendered public activity, and how the knowledge of the latter had possibly influenced their descriptions of the former. As quoted above, Varthema constantly refers to the devil and sacrifice in his narrative, and similarly, parts of Tavernier's depiction of sati tend to be closer to satanic ritual than anything else, heightened not only by cruelty but also corruption: "he (the governor) has received the coin in a surly manner gives the woman leave, bidding the **Devil** take her and all her kindred"[xxviii]. As a result, quite paradoxically, in their double attempts to silence the heterotopic subaltern and to erase the visibility of the domestic subaltern, early modern travellers' textual practices did, largely unconsciously and irresistibly, build a discursive platform for them to exert a sphere of influence upon each other. In the opposite direction but following the same osmotic logic, the positive depiction of the sati as a devotional wife and chaste hero also resonate with European male fantasies of a domestic femininity characterised by submissiveness, obedience and passivity, as advocated by contemporaneous instructive materials such as conduct books and homilies[xxix]. Hence, such textual analyses are supportive towards the socio-historical reality that at that time Europe only had a "veritable 'renaissance' of the outlook and practices of classical Athens, with its domestic imprisonment of citizen wives"[xxx]. Moreover, the dialogic relations between the brown women and the white women in these texts, formed in the epistemic violence of the white men's ventriloquism, underscore the symbiotic relations between the construction of the Orient and that of the Occidental femininity: femininity's ironic participation in the seemingly hyper-masculine activities of early modern travelling is guaranteed in, as Ciolkowski[xxxi] argues, that "domestic womanhood is the yardstick against which all varieties of cultural otherness...are measured" and, of course as it has to be added, that such yardstick, as an integral part of the European self, is also highly susceptible to the influence of the other.

To conclude, detailed readings of early modern travel narratives, by outlining and materialising certain historical "murmurs"[xxxii], can offer fresh insights to compensate post-colonialism's sometimes unidirectional overemphasis on European subjugation of the other. As Banerjee[xxxiii] comments, in orientalist encounters as such, "the line between self and the distant other was...frequently blurred, and the other was always threatening to collapse into the self", and in the case of early modern European depictions of sati, it was patriarchy that created the porous borders supposedly demarcating the brown world and the white world. Therefore, to address Spivak's sentence, if the "deep shadow" she was forced to dwell in was also penetrated by this patriarchal porosity, then her Indian subaltern perhaps did speak, albeit through a kind of involuntary complicity in forming European femininity and its invisible subalternity.

**Part 2: Enlightenment Myths of Chivalry—the Increasing Abstraction of India in European Soliloquy**

If the earlier travel narratives analysed in the previous part help address Spivak's sentence by demonstrating the subaltern's passive engagement in the positional formation of European selfhood, the semi-fictional and semi-mythical Enlightenment travel narratives this part seeks to discuss would reveal how such self-formation, through diachronic socio-cultural changes within Europe, has come to verge on narcissistic proclivities and solipsistic potentialities at the expense of any meaningful concern over the Other at all. Voltaire's story on sati is selected as the primary text for this section, not only because of the representative status he enjoys as one of the most prominent Enlightenment philosophers, but also due to this almost oxymoronic mixture of iconoclastic and narcissistic tendencies his narrative has. Through a close reading of Voltaire's legend of chivalry, it will be argued that Enlightenment travel narratives on sati tend to be preoccupied with critiquing their own society in a time of grand changes, and inevitably in this process the sati just becomes a generalisable metonym for an abstract yet reductive picture of India.

At first glance, chapter X of Voltaire's *Zadig*, retelling the story of how the eponymous protagonist uses his wisdom to not only save the sati called Almona, but also abolish the "inhuman"[xxxiv] custom in all of Abrabia altogether, seems to be the perfect narrative illustration of Spivak's statement. However, while Voltaire's Zadig did share the sort of vacillation between repulsion ("Zadig remonstrated to Setoc, what a shocking custom this was, and how directly repugnant to human nature..."[xxxv]) and admiration ("he...applauded her for her heroic constancy and courage"[xxxvi]) mentioned in part one, the named sati in the story had also talked to offer explanation for her decision:

"*Alas! With a sigh, cried Almona,, 'tis a shock indeed to nature; but must be complied with for all that. I am a profess'd devotee, and should I show the least reluctance, my reputation would be lost forever.; all the world would laugh at me...Zadig having forced her ingenuously*

*to confess, that she parted with her life more out of regard to what the world would say of her, and out of pride and ostentation, than any real love for the deceased...*"[xxxvii].

Ventriloquised into a more exhibitionist literary voice, the subaltern, in such fictionalised confession, thus affirms the westerner's disgust and admits her motivation for self-immolation is only to demonstrate religious deference and to gratify her own vanity. According to Rajan[xxxviii], such reductive fabrication then homogenises sati into a "universal, unchanging ritual"[xxxix], whose static nature supposedly locked in eternity should only be tackled by its own destruction, and this erasure, as quite naturally presented in such stories, only invites the legendary knighthood and chivalry of the colonialist intervention of European expansionist nations. However, while such textual analyses can be generally agreed upon, a more contextual reading, taking into consideration of Voltaire's political ideologies produced in the historical specificity of the Enlightenment movement, would help us see through the story's superficial resemblance towards patterns of colonialism and locate the real dialogue he wanted to deliver.

As Andrea Major[xl] has pointed out, built upon an already large repository of textual/visual materials accumulated by earlier travellers, Enlightenment narratives about sati are distinguished by their increasing concentration on interpretation instead of recording, and it becomes more plausible that they are highly susceptible to fictive elements brought in by the the writers' own social ideologies and political agendas. Correspondingly, evident in Zadig's rescue of the sati is Voltaire's reformative advocacy for reason, secularism and humanitarianism. Firstly, even before Zadig started debating about sati with his master Setoc, Voltaire has already established the positionality of the two interlocutors, alleviating Zadig's being to a superior and enlightened status—"the **superior** wisdom of his slave **enlightened** his (Setoc's) mind"[xli]; and then more conspicuously, Setoc's argument based upon irrational stasis was totally defeated by Zadig's almost sloganeering of the claim—"**reason** is of more ancient date than the custom you plead for"[xlii]—in its most magnanimous triumphalism. This advocacy of reason is also revealed in Voltaire's/Zadig's use of language related to the then emerging European concepts of legality and citizenship, highlighting the social function of the sati as a mother citizen: "...permitting young widows, almost everyday, to become willful **self-murderers**; when they might be of service to their country, either by the addition of new **subjects**, or by the education of such as demanded their **maternal indulgence**"[xliii].

Secondly, as analysed in the previous paragraph, by attributing the sati's suicidal motivation to deference to customs, Voltaire also attacks religious bigotry generally through satire. In this case, the sati and perhaps India as a whole have become an abstract metonym for the kind of dogmatism embedded in an increasingly outdated Christian authoritarianism as well: "Voltaire sympathised with the sati less out of concern for her suffering than out of rationalistic outrage: she represented the ideal victim of religious superstition"[xliv]. Lastly, the proliferation of such rescue myths in the Enlightenment era was also linked to the

Foucaultian epistemic shift of the perception about public punishment in Europe. As Foucault[xlv] has noted, at the time of Voltaire's writing, namely mid-eighteenth century, the traditional penal spectacle of corporeal punishment was increasingly in disfavour due to an emerging moral climate formed around concepts of humanitarianism and utilitarianism. In literature, such concepts manifested as the intensified focus on the individual body as "locus of human rights and autonomy"[xlvi], as well as an increasing allegorical superimposition of rational universalism upon orientalist encounters. These historical ethos help explain why Voltaire gave a name and voice to the sati in his story, and also why, in spite of a too obvious disregard of historical authenticity and accuracy, his hero's romantic chivalry had to be expanded and sublimated into a mythical legend of revolution totally capable of altering cultural history: "Zadig, therefore, with the strictest justice, was looked upon by all the fair sex in Arabia, as their most bountiful benefactor"[xlvii].

It should become clear at this point that compared to the eye-witness accounts from earlier travel narratives, the orientalist stories on sati from the Enlightenment era, exemplified by Voltaire's Zadig, not only care less about Indian reality than fulfilling their own political-cultural ideologies, but also tend to manipulate the former in service to the latter. Therefore, if part one has showed how patriarchal porosity propelled Varthema and Tavernier to unconsciously build a dialogue between oppressed subalternities, the mythical chivalry consciously constructed by Voltaire in this part, regardless of having given the subaltern sati a name and voice in a twist of paradoxical irony, is then more of a narcissistic soliloquy of the white man. Similar to Mani's argument on how sati, "an exceptional and caste-specific practice", became generalised as "a potent signifier...of the degradation of India as a whole"[xlviii] under British rule, in a even more solipsistic manner, Enlightenment narratives on sati are ultimately about how some enlightened white men speak to other white men, making their world ever more white by holding a brown mirror called India, in which the sati is just a distorted reflection.

**Conclusion**

To summarise, in a cautious attempt to explore the cultural heterogeneity and socio-historical specificities of orientalist encounters through both textual and contextual readings, this essay has pointed out the limitations of Spivak's statement in its analytical applications for early modern travel narratives. Firstly, part one has proposed that, in earlier accounts, one way the subaltern sati could still speak in her discursive submission is hidden within its relation with white women. In a ventriloquised echo mediated by the domination of European masculinity in both Varthema and Tavernier's texts, the silenced sati in India still speaks indirectly to the absent European woman through the comparative role she plays in Europe's judgmental constructions of femininity. Secondly, part two has taken a critical approach to investigate the degree of (ir)relevance of sati's actuality to Enlightenment writers' obsession with domestic

politics. What has been found is that, embroiled in the transformational Enlightenment zeitgeist, these white men and their characters only pretended to save brown women, in order to save themselves. To put it into Banerjee[xlix]'s words again, with the analytical spotlight shone upon the Other's bearing on the Self, part one demonstrates how the lines diving them become "blurred" while part two demonstrates how the former totally "collapses" into the latter.

In her book *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Elizabeth Bronfen explains the cultural dynamics between the female corpse and western gaze: "both femininity and death serve as western culture's privileged topoi and tropes for what is superlatively enigmatic"[l], and in the case of early modern travel narratives concerning sati, due to their explorative and anamorphic nature, such enigma often succumbs to a high degree of manipulability and malleability. So as has done by this essay, the mission upon new waves of post-colonial criticisms is to deconstruct orientalism's dogmatic tendencies as rigid analytic models, and then reconstruct its critical poignancy, adaptability and durability through more diversified and in-depth (con)textual engagements.

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