

CONSTRUCTIONS OF ENGENDERMENT: THE CHANGING
DEFINITIONS OF THE FEMININE IDEAL IN ICONIC
TWENTIETH-CENTURY REPRESENTATIONS
OF INDIAN WOMEN

by

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ABSTRACT

As both historical and contemporary figures, South Asian women are expected to represent somewhat contradictory symbols. Modesty and virtue are held, above all, as characteristics of utmost importance in a wife, mother, and daughter, who can also be a powerful, nationalistic, goddess-like ideal. This ideal channels *shakti*: a sacred female energy which empowers women to defend tradition, family, and the nation. How do women in a rapidly developing India reconcile the expectations of the traditional ideal with modern standards?

In Indian literature, film, and the media, we still see a confusion, for both men and women, of how women are to be defined – as individuals or symbols. We see this reflection as a widespread theme in modern Indian issues, not just as a question of women’s rights, but as an interpretation of the construction of gender itself. In exploring three iconic representations of women across genres in the 20th century, I assert that continually re-examining particularly influential female symbols in India is essential to understanding the culture surrounding modern Indian women. The understanding of culture is constantly changing, evolving, and influencing new definitions of Indian femininity.

The first, a fictional character in the novel *The Home and the World*, by Rabindranath Tagore, is important for its depiction of a woman's journey from the conservative identity she had defined as a girl, to the radical identity of a powerful national figure. Second, the 1957 film *Mother India*, personifies the female ideal into the main character, reasserting Hindu values and traditional gender roles within the 20th century framework of nationalism. Finally, I will examine the controversy surrounding the death of Roop Kanwar, a young woman who died while burning on her husband's funeral pyre in an act known as sati: a striking example of past ideals colliding with the modern world. These iconic representations, fictional and nonfictional, from different periods of history, share themes of how female individuals can transform definitions of womanhood. In the context of these examples, we better understand how women in India today struggle to adapt to modern culture, while trying to defend Indian traditional values.

“Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “Third World woman” caught between tradition and modernization.”

- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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INTRODUCTION

As both historical and contemporary figures, South Asian women are expected to represent somewhat contradictory symbols. The women generally have their separate sphere – the *zenana* – and hide a multitude of implied imperfections behind a *dupatta* or *burqa*. Modesty and virtue are held, above all, as characteristics of utmost importance in a wife, mother, and daughter – embodied in the character of “Mother India.” In this form, a woman is encompassed within a powerful, nationalistic, goddess-like ideal. This ideal channels *shakti*: a sacred female energy which empowers women to defend tradition, family, and the nation. How do women in a rapidly developing India reconcile the expectations of the traditional ideal with modern standards?

Though lacking a widespread dogmatic belief system, India’s plural religious philosophies consistently put pressure on women as the purveyors of chastity while at the same time the instigators of change. Hindu tradition encouraged domesticity, and literature from 19th-century Bengal consistently portrays the woman as care-taker, responsible for her family’s welfare and the household. Because women were not generally educated, social or

political expression was not within their reach. Indeed, modern education was a menace to the adherence of sacred ritual and created an “archetypal evil woman” – a threat to the moral order.¹

Antoinette Burton’s *Dwelling in the Archive* presents a view through which writings and memories made in the home can serve as evidence of political and social history. Female poetry and narratives have generally been relegated to the sphere of “literature” rather than sources for history, but Burton attempts to show how the record of women’s feelings and memories can indeed be considered as “one of the foundations of history – history conceived of, that is, as a narrative, a practice, and a site of desire.”² As with Burton’s desire to recognize literature as history, I hope to show that sources need not be grouped according to genre or time period – that common themes of a topic like women’s identities can be woven throughout and between. A historian must resist the temptation to “ghettoize women’s memories as either privatized commemorations of family forms and domestic life or as expressions of a purely ‘psychic’ state.”³ Indeed, though female sentiments often reflect individual states of mind and family dynamics, they can represent larger pictures of how historians on a global scale can find the

¹ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 32.

² *Ibid.*, 35.

³ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

voices of a group often relegated to what was and is often still considered a biased and confused view of their own social, economic, and political roles.

Lati Mani's *Contention Traditions*, which focuses on the practice of sati, illuminates how the confusion of women's individual roles in their choices has been perpetuated. In the aftermath of concepts such as "tradition" and "modernity," we find that the choices and motivations of individual women are undeniably ignored in favor of larger debates about feminism and nationalism. Women were, like we shall see next in Nandini Bhattacharya's estimation, symbols and metaphors caught up in national stages – not individuals. Either side examined women's agency only insofar that they could use it to champion their own cause. However, her underlying focus on the tragedy of the loss of the female voice and her assumption that, from all perspectives, women were simply and as a rule coerced by social strictures, further contributes to the feminist omission that women's agency was completely squashed and that they should not have chosen to commit sati had someone not led them to the fire - a notion which, as a metaphor for women's agency portrayed in literature, film, and the media, can be further explored. If the traditional female ideal is primarily perpetuated outside of a woman's own desire, how is the idea of the modern woman disseminated? The question is as complex as India itself, and answers are often as confused as the portrayal of the globalized, yet traditionally responsible woman.

For modern women, with the influx of Western culture, more blatant sexuality and use of the female body is more widespread, yet in literature, film, and the media, we still see a confusion, for both men and women, of what women are meant to be – how they are to be defined – as individuals or symbols, how they are supposed to act in the public sphere, what is acceptable to feel about them, and how they should feel about themselves. We see this reflection as a widespread theme in modern Indian issues, not just as a political matter or question of women's rights, but as an interpretation of the construction of gender itself. In exploring three iconic representations of women across genres in the 20th century, I assert that continually re-examining particularly influential female symbols in India is essential to understanding the culture surrounding modern Indian women. While social historians move toward examining regional and lesser-known literature, films, and events involving women, I argue that though it is valuable to recognize regional and cultural variances within the country itself, iconic symbols are iconic for a reason. They are constantly changing, evolving, and influencing new definitions of Indian femininity in the country as a whole, as well as how outside nations view women in developing countries.

The female identities in the three iconic figures I have chosen to examine are complex characters, with whom the public struggles with seemingly contradictory versions of women as alternately powerful and sexual beings and paragons of chastity and humility. The first, a fictional

character in the novel *The Home and the World*, by Rabindranath Tagore, chosen for the author's depiction of a woman's journey from the conservative identity she had defined as a girl, to the radical identity of a powerful national figure. Second, the 1957 film *Mother India*, personifies the female ideal into the character of Radha. She is a mother abandoned by her husband and suffering from extreme poverty, who endures by adhering to a strict moral code. She symbolizes the ultimate traditional, virtuous, self-sacrificing Hindu woman.

The film branches into modern culture by emphasizing long-established Hindu values, gender roles, and empowerment within the 20th-century framework of nationalism. Finally, I will examine the political and social controversies surrounding the identity of Roop Kanwar, a young newlywed who died while burning on her husband's funeral pyre in an act known as sati. This event, occurring 1987, is a striking example of past ideals colliding with the modern world. All three iconic representations, fictional and nonfictional, all from different periods of history, still share major themes of how sacrifice and strong, assertive female individuals transform definitions of womanhood. In the context of these examples, we better understand how women in India today are still struggling to become working mothers, CEOs, politicians, and figures in the media, while trying to defend and represent traditional values.

WOMANHOOD AND NATIONALISM: *THE HOME AND
THE WORLD*

Tagore's writing has been influential for its portrayal of nationalism and a revolutionary time period in India. The book is told from several different viewpoints, one of them a first-person account from the woman herself. The other accounts, one from her husband and one from her implied lover, revolve around a complex intellectual battle for her loyalty. Tagore's storytelling weaves around the historical events of Gandhi and *swadeshi* in the beginning of the 20th century, which reflect the tumultuous passage of the defined female ideal in such times.

The main female protagonist, Bimala, undergoes a major transformation from one ideal to the other – from the modest, devoted wife to a powerful representation of *shakti*. At the beginning of the novel, she herself describes the traditional ideal: “Can there be any real happiness for a woman in merely feeling that she has power over a man? To surrender one's pride in devotion is woman's only salvation.”¹ The moments in which she “takes the dust” of her husband's feet, she does so secretly, as he sleeps, as part of her

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*. (London: Penguin Group, 1985), 21.

daily form of worship for him. She never leaves the *zenana*, although her husband does not force her to stay there – she enforces her own seclusion. This is significant as yet another example of women’s own perpetuation of the contradictory ideals. Women do, indeed, have their own forms of power within the household, but when it comes to interactions outside of their assigned sphere, the way they are meant to act is not negotiable. Until, that is, in Bimala’s case, she encounters the seductive nature of another ideal: that of her feminine sensuality and potential symbolic power as a form of Mother India – the possibility of being a physically expressive, bodily representation of something larger than herself.

Sandip, a single friend of her husband, Nikhil, comes to visit their home and becomes a force that opens Bimala’s world beyond the worship of her husband. She leaves the *zenana*, believing Sandip when he finds in her a power he can use for his own: “his language had caught fire from my eyes; for we women are not only the deities of the household fire, but the flame of the soul itself.”² As she becomes more deeply involved with Sandip and his philosophy of *swadeshi*, she finds that if she is to retain her power, in many ways she betrays her husband. By participating in the outside world, she sacrifices more and more of her modesty and seclusion for the sake of exhibiting power, and yet this power already manifests itself in her femininity.

² Ibid, 31.

Bimala is constantly dealing with different expectations: her own guilt from her ideas of wifely modesty and devotion, Nikhil's conflicted desire for her to be both his wife and "free," and Sandip's encouragement of her divinity as a symbol for Mother India. At some points, she is triumphant and rejects her former meekness - "Sin taints only the weak; I with my *Shakti* am beyond its reach."³ However, in spite of her passionate nationalism, being both a powerful woman and the ideal wife is not simultaneously possible; Bimala must give up one to be the other. Ultimately, Tagore does not resolve the issue for us. Bimala is a changed woman, but which life she chooses is not completely clear – reflecting, yet again, the cultural confusion over feminine expectations and identities.

Sachidananda Mohanty explores this "burden of *Shakti*" in his article on female agency and political participation. As he reviews literary women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he comes across the same conflicts in femininity that are explained in *The Home and the World* through Bimala. The concept of *shakti* is meant to be empowering, but Mohanty suggests that such empowerment yields "unsolved contradictions: personal love versus public service, drudgery of domestic life versus the desire for creativity, the loyalty to a married partner vis-à-vis the attraction to a true companion of the soul, intimate social longing and demands for public chastity."⁴ Like Bimala, Mohanty points out that women who embraced *shakti* alternated

³ Ibid, 138.

⁴ Susan Dewey, "Dear Dr. Kothari...": Sexuality, Violence against Women, and the Parallel Public Sphere in India." *American Ethnologist* Vol. 36, No. 1 (Feb., 2009), 125.

between “self-affirmation and self-doubt.”⁵ Indeed, both fiction and history portray a long-standing confusion that society creates for the female ideal. On one hand, representations of feminine power and strength are positive in the context of nationality, and yet conflict with social norms of virtue and meekness for women as individuals.

Her character is symbolic – a representation of women as they have been for centuries and how they continue to survive according to both the demands of modernization and traditional society. Though her story is set in modernizing India, she is an enduring example of the female ideal – while she wants better for herself, she never breaks out of the true traditional mold set out for her. As described in Sumanta Banerjee’s writings on women’s popular culture in Bengal, a model woman’s “end and aim of her life is to cultivate domestic affections, to minister to the comfort and happiness of her husband, to look after and tend to her children, and exercise her little supervision over domestic economies.”⁶ Indeed, despite Tagore’s seeming advocacy for women to branch out into the public world, Bimala herself sees how her shift to passions outside of her marriage and home is ultimately destructive: “Possibly this is woman’s nature. When, like the river, we women

⁵ Ibid, 127.

⁶ Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalization of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 162.

keep to our banks, we give nourishment...when we overflow them we destroy.”⁷

The ultimate message is that of acceptance and resilience of the human spirit that exists in hardship. Women in particular, again and again, show their power in survival. While in many of these examples, we see women perpetuate their own closed gender roles, at the same time, we see the injustice of socially imposed helplessness. In an article on violence against women and the public sphere in India, Susan Dewey suggests that women’s participation in their own subjugation is yet another part of the vicious gender cycle. In describing an article about the ladies’ compartment on Mumbai commuter trains, Dewey comments that the article’s idea that it is “natural” for women to be “vulnerable to assaults” is reinforced by discussions of attitudes that teach women to blame themselves or other women for abuse. However, their description of the hardships of women’s lives and their need many times simply to survive because they have no other options parallels Dewey’s opinion that women who “live in families economically and socially dominated by men”⁸ are helpless to overcome prevalent ideas about morality.

In “A Sentimental Education: Love and Marriage in *The Home and the World*,” Supriya Chaudhuri argues that Bimala’s desire for self-creation makes her undergo a number of experiences and identities without ever

⁷ Tagore, 51.

⁸ Dewey, 125.

achieving a unified state.⁹ I agree with this assessment, and further assert that part of this uncertain state is that Bimala, despite her words of self-realization, changes to represent what other people wish to see her as – in the beginning of her marriage, she adheres to her mother’s idyllic precedent of being a devoted wife. As Nikhil continually encourages her to educate herself and move into the modern world, she slowly develops into a character she believes he wants. Finally, because of Sandip’s seductive language and the passionate nature of his nationalism, Bimala molds herself into the symbol of Mother India, only at the end finally exploring the self-destructive journey she has taken, which has also destroyed her home and possibly her marriage.

Tagore’s creation of Bimala’s conflicted character reflects how gender norms interconnect a woman’s value with both her virtue and power – and suggests that the two, while not mutually exclusive, are yet unresolved in the context of a modernizing world.

Notwithstanding crimes against women and the overarching concern of human rights, South Asian women are complex characters who must reconcile their identities as sexualized, powerful beings with the ideal they are expected to live up to – that of the chaste, devoted woman who must embody the honor of the men in her life. As such, the “modern” Indian girl’s passage to womanhood today reflects Bimala’s own realization of herself: “I

⁹ Supriya Chaudhuri, “A Sentimental Education: Love and Marriage in *The Home and the World*” in *Rabindranath Tagore’s The Home and the World: A Critical Companion*, ed. Pradip K. Datta (Permanent Black, 2002), 23.

have anger. I have my desire to be fascinated, and fascination must be supplied to me in bodily shape by my country. I am an human, not divine.”¹⁰

In *The Home and the World*, the path of self-construction happens as a result of nationalism, not because of her own husband’s desire for her to realize her own potential. Today, women’s path to self-realization is a reaction to globalization and messages from every type of communication. The impetus of modernization, though different from the symbolic nature of nationalism, is equally as abstract to the individual woman.

¹⁰ Tagore, 38.

SACRIFICE AND POWER: *MOTHER INDIA*

Moving ahead a few decades, to the 1957 Hindi film, *Mother India*, we see how representations of women in film can be a powerful tool to send messages to a wide audience. Originally meaningful as a nationalistic symbol, the term “Mother India” became controversial because of Katherine Mayo’s 1927 book titled *Mother India*, in which she argued against Indian self-rule by referencing the terrible treatment of women and untouchables as well as the depravity of Indian men, attacking the worst aspects of Indian society to support British imperialist rule.¹ Later employed as the title for the film *Mother India*, the term itself came to intentionally challenge the damaging images portrayed by Mayo, in an “attempt to evict from the minds of the people the scurrilous work that is Miss Mayo’s book.”² The term has therefore come to represent conflicting narratives of India, and can alternately be used to refer to the country’s worst aspects as well as the symbolic female power of the nation.

Mrinalini Sinha’s *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire*, is an examination of how Katherine Mayo’s

¹ Mrinalini Sinha, “Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late-Colonial India,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Autumn, 2000), 623-644.

² Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: the Global Restructuring of an Empire*. (Duke University Press, 2006), 248.

Mother India affected views and structures which were already under strain from the Indian independence movement. She brings to the forefront controversies over a new dialogue on women's issues and an illumination of how the book stirs questions over colonial rule.

The conflicting position of women in society is significant in seeing how Katherine Mayo's claims affected preexisting views of femininity. "The modern woman... was expected to occupy a precarious position as the symbol of the colonized nation's "betweenness": a self-conscious middle ground suspended between the poles of a "Western" modernity and of an unreformed indigenous "tradition."³ The difficulty for women in India's changing society was, however, not created by the sensation over *Mother India*, but rather "on the eve of the publication of Mayo's *Mother India*, the discourse of the Indian 'woman question' was already ripe for a major rhetorical reorientation."⁴

Although the book's intent was to reveal the backwardness of Hinduism (and thereby attacking the idea of the Hindu woman, who was a representation of Indian culture as a whole), "the controversy provided an unprecedented opportunity for both constructing and showcasing a new public discourse by and of Indian women,"⁵ which had the opposite effect of Mayo's original intention. Women searching for higher dialogue on the issue of their own rights found it because "the debates surrounding *Mother India* provided a national, and even international, stage for the constitution of

³ Ibid, 47.

⁴ Ibid, 43.

⁵ Ibid, 140.

Indian women as *subjects* of the discourse on the women's question in India."⁶

The use of film to understand the development and construction of the "modern girl" beginning in the 20th century is particularly important, because film is perhaps the instrument most able to reach large segments of the population, literate and illiterate, generally regardless of gender, education, or class. Priti Ramamurthy's article on the "Modern Girl in India in the Interwar Years" focuses on a very interesting cross-section of film in the 20th century, a few decades before the release of *Mother India*. She explores the appearance of a "cheeky, cosmopolitan, and seductive [woman]...an icon of commodity culture"⁷ in Indian cinema in the social identity debate during the 1920s and 30s.

In a similar vein of Tagore's *The Home and the World*, this "modern girl" genre of film "explored the complexities of modernity facing households...Women exercised individual autonomy and the freedom to choose..."⁸ Ramamurthy describes how the women in these films reinvented what it meant to be a woman in the Indian family, and celebrated female sexuality and the fluidity of gender roles. The new modern girl was obviously very different from traditional ideals of femininity, and further challenged the "archetypal New Woman of the anticolonial movement...a trope of

⁶ Ibid, 141.

⁷ Priti Ramamurthy, "The Modern Girl in India in the Interwar Years: Interracial Intimacies, International Competition, and Historical Eclipsing" (*Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. ½, The Global and the Intimate (Spring-Summer, 2006)), 202.

⁸ Ibid, 202.

woman-as-nation.”⁹ Interestingly, despite the desire to “transgress conventional social norms,” the message of subversion was still “contained by Modern Girl Heroines meeting a violent end or being otherwise chagrined.”¹⁰

This small revolution in film was short-lived. After the mid-1930s, Ramamurthy states, “there was less room for such experimentation with gender roles.”¹¹ The actress Pramila, who starred in *Mother India* in 1957, describes how the story contrasted with former “modern” ideas of a much more corporeal, worldly woman in film: “[It was] an effort to create a true Indian woman as against a modern westernized one.”¹² Moving ahead toward the latter half of the 20th century, story lines became more didactic and “Indianized, signified by woman as a good wife, now in the modern role of companion whose desire for modernity was contained by the need to serve her modern husband better.”¹³

Nandini Bhattacharya additionally makes a valuable point in understanding one particular reason why film is an integral part of defining gender roles. Dialogue, she states, is usually supplemental to body language. In the case of Indian women, however, the inability to effectively communicate was usually the largest barrier to understanding their individual consciousness. As a result, “Western observers intensified visual symbolism and metaphorized Indian women’s bodies...The writers connected

⁹ Ibid, 204

¹⁰ Ibid, 203.

¹¹ Ibid, 208.

¹² Ibid, 208.

¹³ Ibid, 208-209.

the material and physical attributes of women's bodies and their psychosocial and sexual propensities to the problem of Indian culture itself, which they perceived as both valuable and exclusionary, and as dangerous and diseased."¹⁴ In Bhattacharya's book, *Reading the Splendid Body*, she illuminates another way to "read" women – by utilizing tools which Westerners had previously use to objectify the Indian woman, she searches for women's voices through the descriptions of their bodies. However, by metaphorizing women's bodies to symbolize characteristics and definitions of India as a whole, women's individuality seems yet again subjugated to the higher importance of her representation of larger issues, and thus moves away from the possibility of a concise, defined, expectation – public or private – for the woman as a social actor.

Radha is a mother suffering from extreme poverty and degradation, yet endures by adhering to a strict moral code, symbolizing the ultimate traditional, virtuous, self-sacrificing Hindu woman. The film's depiction of Radha as the ideal woman branches into modern culture by emphasizing traditional Hindu values, gender roles, and empowerment within the framework of nationalism.

¹⁴ Nandini Bhattacharya, *Reading the Splendid Body: Gender and Consumerism in Eighteenth-Century British Writing on India* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), 15.

Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* has since become part of the canon of Bollywood classics,¹⁵ and was nominated for best Foreign Language Film in the 1958 Academy Awards.¹⁶ Inspired by American author Pearl Buck's novels about China, *The Good Earth* (1931) and *The Mother* (1934), Khan cast Nargis, an already famous Bollywood actress, to depict the rural Indian woman as the opposite of what Katherine Mayo described in her defamatory book.¹⁷ Released nearly a decade after Indian Independence in 1947, the film's message seems to be a protest against the negative way the West viewed India, an effort to highlight and restore traditional Indian values through the iconic Indian woman.

The most poignant theme in the film is that of sacrifice, emphasizing the selfless character of Radha as the ideal Indian woman. The alternating expectations of a woman to be submissive, modest, and dutiful occasionally contrast with Radha's actions as she becomes the main provider for her family and a voice of leadership in her village, and ultimately the hand of justice as she sacrifices her own son in the name of honor. While depicting traditional Hindu values and emphasizing the importance of marriage and motherhood, the film is also suggestive of female empowerment through Radha's strength, ingenuity, and courage.

¹⁵ *Time Specials*. "Best of Bollywood." Accessed April 13, 2013. http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2022076_2022067_2022040,00.html

¹⁶ The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. "The 30th Academy Awards (1958) Nominees and Winners." Accessed April 13, 2013. <http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/legacy/ceremony/30th-winners.html>

¹⁷ Sinha, 2006, 248.

The story begins with Radha as a grey-haired old woman, the “mother” of her village. As she reluctantly opens a new canal in the village at the urging of her son, her memory flashes back to the beginning of her life there as a new bride. Showing a lavish wedding between Radha as a beautiful young woman and her husband Shamu, we first catch a glimpse of Radha’s character when she discovers that her mother-in-law mortgaged their land to pay for the wedding. Immediately she removes her bridal jewelry, asking her husband to sell it, and sets to work in the household as well as on the farm. Caught in a vicious cycle of poverty, Radha and Shamu must pay three parts of their harvest to the moneylender. After Shamu has an accident that crushes his arms and makes him unable to contribute, he leaves the family and does not return. Faithful to him, Radha refuses to marry the moneylender and continues to work in the fields despite being pregnant with a third child. When a flood decimates the village and kills her baby, Radha yet again refuses to compromise her virtue with the moneylender and convinces the villagers to stay and rebuild.

Radha’s sons, Birju and Ramu, grow into young men and help their mother work on their farm. Still subject to payments of interest from their grandmother’s loan, Birju becomes more and more resentful of the injustice of their situation, yet spends his time gambling and teasing village girls, while Ramu is a reliable, calm-tempered hard worker. Birju’s anger escalates despite Radha’s attempts to keep him in check and he is chased out of the

village. After becoming a bandit, he kills the moneylender and kidnaps his daughter. Radha, rather than letting him compromise the honor of the young woman, kills Birju herself and holds him as he dies in her arms. The film pans back to Radha as an old woman opening the canal, through which the water flows to the fields, symbolically red, as though the revitalization of the fields comes through Birju's death – and Radha's sacrifice.

Radha's dedication within her marriage is reflective of the symbolic nature of her name, the name of the childhood friend of the Hindu God Krishna. Radha's love for Krishna has an endless, passionate, and unconditional nature,¹⁸ echoing Nargis' depiction of the devoted wife and mother within the film. She is modest and will not accept compliments or gifts from her husband, insisting on putting away her bridal finery early on. She works and cleans incessantly, not letting her mother-in-law help with the housework. Numerous scenes show Radha in the part of the selfless woman, going with little or no food so her husband and children may eat, sleeping at her husband's feet at night, massaging his legs until she can no longer stay awake, working at his sides in the fields even while pregnant.

After Shamu's accident, Radha lovingly cares for him, feeding him herself and forbidding him to wish for death, continuing with the work of the farm on her own. When he leaves the family and she cannot find him, she replaces the gold bangles of her marriage with black thread, loyal to him

¹⁸ David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers (January 1998), 81-83.

despite the hardship of caring for the family alone. The song “Nagari Nagari Dvaare Dvaare” is significant in showing Radha’s devotion to her husband, referencing the pain of separation and the idea that a woman’s husband is the reason for living.¹⁹

One particularly powerful scene reveals Radha after giving birth to her third child, standing up to refuse the return of their ox and a marriage proposal from the moneylender, Sukhilala. Her poverty worsens after an untimely flood destroys the harvest and the village. When her baby dies and she sees her sons starving, she goes to Sukhilala’s home, covered in mud – reflecting her connection to the earth – willing to “sell herself” to save her children. Tearing off her *mangalsutra* (a thread or necklace symbolizing her marriage), she throws it away and it lands on a small shrine to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. Noticing the shrine, she shows her shame and bitterness of being forced to give into Sukhilala by speaking to the goddess, telling Lakshmi that she would not have been able to withstand the burdens of motherhood, either.²⁰ When Sukhilala tried to distract her by taking away the shrine, Radha pulls away and insists the shrine stay as evidence that the goddess gave Sukhilala his wealth. Facing Sukhilala and holding the shrine, the *mangalsutra* falls onto Radha and in a moment of self-actualization, she

¹⁹ HindiLyrics. “Hindi Lyrics Translation: Nagari Nagari Dvaare Dvaare,” Accessed April 12, 2012. <http://www.hindilyrics.net/translation-Mother-India/Nagari-Nagari-Dvaare-Dvaare.html>

²⁰ Nandini Bhattacharya, “Imagined Subjects: Law, Gender, and Citizenship in Indian Cinema,” in *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*, edited by Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Rajeshwari Pandharipande (Anthem Press, London: 2010), 134-135.

regains the power and pride she needs to rebuff Sukhilala's advances.

Replacing her *mangalsutra* is symbolic of her loyalty and long-suffering devotion to her absent husband. With the return of her own goddess-like power, Radha is able to convince the villagers to rework the land and save her children from starving.

Radha's resilience and hard work results in more successful harvests, and she raises her sons into strong young men. However, she is still subject to the unjust interest payments of the loan from her own wedding. Though she accepts this oppression, she is unable to control the bitterness and wild nature of Birju, her younger son. Though devoted to her, his antics in the village and his unwillingness to accept the terms of the loan are continual sources of pain to Radha. All illiterate, neither Radha nor her sons are able to read the books of the moneylender to understand their debt. After Birju attacks Sukhi, Radha makes the decision to arrange the marriages of her sons, with the hope that marriage to a good woman would make Birju more responsible. The shame she experiences when the marriage proposal is refused is yet another example of the pain Radha endures as a mother – despite her own values and work ethic, she is unable to impose the same values on her unruly younger son.

The relationship between Radha and Birju is complex because of her desire to uphold traditional values and her love for a son who defies those values. From the beginning of his life, Birju has an uncanny ability to get

away with bad behavior, though it is usually his own protest against situations he feels are unjust. Radha, as the devoted mother, is unsuccessful at disciplining him, always showing him mercy. Her devotion inspires extreme loyalty from Birju. He becomes obsessed with Radha's bridal bangles, which they must give to the moneylender when Birju is young. The bangles become a symbol of his powerlessness and his mother's dignity as he grows older, and ultimately become the source of his downfall when he takes extreme measures to get them back from Sukhi, compromising his own and his family's honor to see them on his mother's wrists. His decline into banditry and murder test Radha's dedication to Hindu morality and honor.

When Birju kidnaps Sukhi's daughter, she stops him and threatens him, saying, "She's my honor. Your honor. The village's honor." Birju does not believe Radha will kill him, invoking the bond of motherhood, but she retorts, "I'm first a woman. I can give up a son. But not my honor!" Her lifelong protection of her own virtue and honor becomes the motivation for finally punishing her son, who, to Radha, symbolically threatens the honor of every woman by kidnapping Sukhi's daughter. When the camera shows Radha standing with the gun after shooting Birju, she represents justice and power, unwilling to compromise her values, even for her son. Yet when she sees Birju fall, she runs to him, again his mother, and holds him while he dies. Representing the ideal Indian woman, Radha makes the ultimate sacrifice of her child to uphold the virtue and honor of all women.

The reputation of Nargis, the woman playing Radha in the film, was forever changed by her portrayal of “Mother India,” not only coming to represent the wives and mothers of the country, but the nation itself. Starring in several other films as the romantic heroine, *Mother India* marked a monumental shift in her career. She retired from film at the young age of 29, possibly because of the “overwhelming public desire for continuity between her film role as ‘elemental, passionate, universal woman’ in *Mother India* and her public persona after this film.”²¹ Indeed, because of the huge popularity of her role, Nargis herself became a symbol – the film role had transformed her into the literal symbol for the nation, so trying to play other roles became nearly impossible for her. The impact of the film clearly affected Nargis, but also created discourses of female chastity, modern nationalism, and morality, coming to stand for the quintessential Indian film.²²

It is significant that the movie could come to surround discourses of nationalism in contemporary India, where Western influence is both a sign of modernism as well as a threat to tradition. Radha is not a modernized woman in urban Delhi, but rather a poor, single mother farming in a rural village. Indians did not protest being represented by such a figure that may have seemed somewhat primitive to the Western world. Rather than

²¹ Neepa Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, (University of Illinois Press, 2009), 150-151.

²² Rosie Thomas, “Sanctity and scandal: The mythologization of mother India,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video, Special Issue: Indian Cinema* (Volume 11, Issue 3, 1989).

considering the portrayal backward or embarrassing, India found pride in Radha's strength as the traditional woman.

Mother India, beyond the direct message of the film, has had much wider implications on Indian culture. The character of Radha signifies the complexity of gender roles in India, as well as how the country lives by contradicting rules – a combination of both the modern world and centuries-old traditions. The enduring popularity of the movie shows how Indian cinema uses women as symbols. As seen through the life of Radha, women are expected to be both bastions of morality, modesty, and virtue, while at the same time upholding the honor of their family – women whose personal strength and powerful influence can change the face of not only a village, but an entire nation.

THE COLLISION OF TRADITION AND MODERNISM:

ROOP KANWAR

Roop Kanwar's death in 1987 made her into an influential figure that brought women's roles to the forefront of a major political battle between modern ideas of women's rights and traditional ideas of women's virtue. Just months after her wedding, eighteen-year-old and newlywed Roop Kanwar burned to death on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Her immolation, portrayed as the ultimate act of virtue for a Hindu widow, caused national uproar over the place of tradition in a modern India – particularly for women. It is believed that a woman who becomes a true sati is endowed with power, becoming a demi-goddess worshipped after death.¹ The earliest mention of sati is in the Mahabharata (circa 300 B.C.) when the wives of Lord Krishna willingly died on his funeral pyre. A later scripture, the Vishnumriti, mentions it as a way for a woman to become a man in the cycle of rebirth.² Historically, a sati mata (Mother Sati) is revered as a local saint, where villagers build shrines commemorating the sati ceremony. Sati

¹ For clarification, in this paper I use the word *sati* interchangeably for both the actor and the act.

brought communities together and though not commonly practiced, came to represent a major characteristic of Indian culture.

The aftermath of Roop Kanwar's death changed existing structures centered on the treatment of and power of women. This event affected the worldview of India's character, blowing up into a major struggle between Indian conservatives who revere sati as a part of their religious culture and those who see sati as a remnant of past brutality toward women. Roop Kanwar's death has become a lens for analyzing gender issues and religious sentiments in India "because of the contradictions in the various narratives that the sati has elicited. Her sati has been variously constructed as religious phenomenon, indigenous practice, emblem of culture, sign of backwardness, and feminist nightmare."³

In the case of Roop Kanwar, we cannot determine her intent. Even more unfortunate is the fact that the accounts of witnesses to the event are likely tainted either by fear or resentment. Many reacted defensively, either because they felt their traditions were being unfairly portrayed or because they wished to hide the more doubtful facts of the case. As a result of the mystery that shrouds the event, we have lost her voice in the louder outcries of those who used her death as a symbolic event for larger issues.

Traditionalists use her as a silent spokeswoman for Hindu values and belief in the power of sati. Feminists use her as an emblem of female repression –

³ Paul B. Courtright and Namita Goswami. "Who Was Roop Kanwar? Sati, Law, Religion, and Postcolonial Feminism" in *Religion and Personal Law in Secular India: A Call to Judgment*, ed. Gerald James Larson, 208 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

what happens to a woman when she is forced to conform to patriarchal and brutal rituals from old India. Because Roop was silenced by her death, this event affected the confusion over women by the perceptions of feminists and traditionalists alike who have defined Roop as a symbol rather than a woman – much like the confusion of Bimala in Tagore’s novel, written nearly 70 years earlier.

Roop Kanwar’s death and subsequent characterization as a symbol for India’s debate over sati, similar to the influence of Bimala and Radha in the previous examples, is an important event that must be recognized as such by contemporary scholars of India. It is a lens into Indian culture, particularly Hindu religious and political structures, the modern conflict between the two, and an instigator of changes in the Indian legal code. Roop Kanwar belongs in the midst of global historical feminist issues, alongside women like Shah Bano and Katherine Mayo, who both changed the way people saw Indian women and provided material for heated debate among historians, politicians, and Indians alike.

A “fundamental mechanism of structural change [is] the necessary but risky application of existing cultural categories to novel circumstances, the action of culturally marking things in the world that transforms the meanings of the cultural markers and thereby reorients the possibilities of human social action.”⁴ Sati, to an international community as well as

⁴ William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 218-219.

Indians, represented a facet of India which was seen either as culturally significant religious tradition in a nationalist and Hindu perspective, or as a brutal legacy from the past which suppressed women in a modern feminists perspective. Sati was, and is, a “culturally marking” thing which, through the event of Roop Kanwar’s sati and the controversy over her death, transformed not just the Indian legal code, but how people considered sati, and Indian women, on a communal, national, and even global level.

Like *Mother India*, Roop Kanwar’s sati was both a manifestation and instigator of issues that had been boiling under the surface of India’s globalizing awareness, for these purposes, from 1916 with the publication of *The Home and the World*, through the independence period and the film *Mother India* in 1957, to the much more public nature of womanhood in the 70s and 80s. Part of Sinha’s argument remains in recognizing the publication of *Mother India* not merely as a symbol for the Indian women’s movement, but as an important event in itself. Mayo’s book has become synonymous with the sensation created as a result, or the lessons learned from it.

Roop Kanwar was a modern woman. Her parents were considered to be wealthy and well-educated, and she had lived most of her life as a city girl as the youngest of six children, in Ranchi, Madhya Pradesh, then in Jaipur, Rajasthan where her father Pal Singh Rathore owned a transport agency.

She married her husband, Maal Singh, on 17 January 1987.⁵ On the night of 3 September he was rushed to a hospital and died the next morning, diagnosed with a severe case of gastroenteritis. Most accounts agree that Roop lived with Maal only about twenty days at the beginning of the marriage and a few days before his death. At the age of eighteen, in Deorala, India, she burned to death on her husband's funeral pyre.

September 4, 1987, Roop Kanwar was led to the funeral pyre and laid next to the corpse of her husband. Her husband's younger brother lit the pyre, then watched Roop burn alive. There are discrepancies among claims that she wished to commit it, happily burning with her husband's corpse and claims that she was drugged and buried under heavy logs. One observer, Meenakshi Khadelwal said, "I saw Roop dressed in bridal make-up walking along with her husband's body with a coconut in hand. There were about 900 people when the body was taken to the cremation ground. Later, the crowd swelled. It took about an hour for the preparation of the pyre. The girl stood like a rock chanting the Gayatri. Once the pyre was ready, she entered it and sat holding her husband's head in her lap. She ordered Pushpendra Singh, her brother-in-law, to light the pyre. As the fire engulfed her, Roop sat serenely talking to her relatives, not showing any sign of pain." Another witness, Teg Singh, said, "She is from a well-educated family. Could this kind of woman have been forced? She was a woman who believed her husband was

⁵ Paul B. Courtright and Namita Goswami, "Who Was Roop Kanwar? Sati, Law, Religion, and Postcolonial Feminism." in *Religion and Personal Law in Secular India: A Call to Judgment*, ed. Gerald James Larson, 200 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

a god and there could be no life for her without him.”⁶ Rajinder Singh, a student who claimed to witness the sati, said that Roop “had an aura about her. She was calm as the flames enveloped her. When I arrived, half her body had burned. She sat on the funeral pyre with folded hands. There was no sign of panic on her face. She was chanting mantras.”⁷

These accounts from identified witnesses are few; many reporters and inquirers, including the police, encountered obstacles when attempting to obtain observations from the crowd present at Kanwar’s death. Reporters from the Women’s Media Committee describe their first impression when arriving in Deorala: “there was a conspiracy of silence...Not a single villager admitted to seeing the sati.”⁸ The same observation was made by a local politician, quoted in the *Toronto Star*, “Today there is a conspiracy of silence in the village. Nobody admits to seeing anything.”⁹ Furthermore, women’s groups found themselves with little support after the event – silence seemed to be a common theme when it came to questioning the tradition. “While the government displayed a total absence of political will and disowned all responsibility to enforce the law, a culture of silence emerged among prominent citizens and intellectuals.”¹⁰

⁶ *Hinduism Today*, “Uproar Over Rajput ‘Sati’: Wife Emolates Herself on Husband’s Funeral Pyre”, Vol. 9, Iss. 9; 1, Dec. 31, 1987.

⁷ Reuter, *Toronto Star*, “Thousands Watch Bride Burn on Husband’s Pyre”, A19, Sep. 17, 1987.

⁸ *Trial by Fire: a Report on Roop Kanwar’s Death* (Bombay: Women and Media Committee, Bombay Union of Journalists, 1987), 2-3.

⁹ Reuter, A19.

¹⁰ Veena Oldenburg, “The Roop Kanwar Case: Feminist Responses” in *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 108.

More accounts gathered by police say that Roop called out on her way to the pyre during the burning, shouting, “bachao.” This word is an informal form of the verb *bachanna* (“help”) – this account implies guilt of friends and family that stood by while she burned without intervening – as she was dying she called to someone she knew well and who was close to her. Kanwar’s father told the Women’s Media Committee team that Roop was heard calling, “Mummy, Papa.” Villagers also admitted to seeing Roop “flail her arms in the air.” However, “this was interpreted...not as a sign of her struggling...but of her showering blessings on them.”¹¹

Manimala Khare asserts in her report that “the truth is that all of Deorala, including her in-laws, wanted Roop Kanwar’s death. The question of whether she did it voluntarily or not is pointless.”¹² Though sati was made illegal in 1829 and it is generally apparent that the villagers were aware of this fact, the defenders of sati – as seen in the arguments of some policemen, argued that the law was yet another colonialist legacy which ignored Indian religion and tradition and was not valid in an independent India.

The community reacted with hostility toward the police and government, claiming their right to ancient religious practices, saying the government interfered with personal matters. The Women’s Media Committee reporters quoted women from the inner quarters of Roop’s home: “Sarkar ne humko bahut dukhi kiya hai” (The government has given us a lot

¹¹ Ibid, 5.

¹² Manimala Khare, *Navbharat Times*, “The Whole Village of Deorala is Guilty”, 4 October 1987.

of trouble).¹³ Some politicians took up the rising cause among the villagers. Kalyan Singh Kalvi, the State Janata Party President, “actively oppos[ed] the ‘interference’ of the government in what he consider[ed] a religious rite.”¹⁴ In fact, political groups quickly became embroiled in the existing hostility toward the government in some areas. “Interest groups tried to gain power and influence with the help of the mental attitude associated with widow burning. It was primarily the symbolic character which is important...For them an isolated event like the burning of Roop Kanwar was much more useful.” Joerg Fisch’s examination of the aftermath of the event describes how politicians and fundamentalist groups latched on to the proponent’s cause in order to bolster their own popularity and gain votes among the Rajput population. This was the result of changing political conditions after independence and continued to intensify, leading up to the events of 1987: “With independence, the masses gained a new political significance in the framework of democracy. They had to be addressed as voters...Politicians who hoped to gain supporters by defending the custom, then intensified it.”¹⁵

Veena Oldenburg’s “The Roop Kanwar Case: Feminist Responses,” refers to an important issue – the difference between colonial feminist response to sati and modern response to Roop’s sati. “In the colonial period it was chiefly men – Hindu reformers and British officials – who debated, and

¹³ *Trial by Fire*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁵ Joerg Fisch, *Burning Women: A Global History*, (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2006), 450-51.

the East India Company that eventually legislated, to abolish the practice in 1829.”¹⁶ “What made the profound difference this time was the activism and concern of women.”¹⁷ This perspective reflects my argument that there is great value in examining iconic representations of women beyond their significance within their specific time frames. Each portrayal of women in my three examples carries common themes which become more significant in viewing with a layered lens – the view of women as a national symbol grew in importance with each icon throughout the 20th century. Bimala’s confusion over her symbolic power and her duty to tradition carries on in the creation of Radha in *Mother India*, which in turn affected how people viewed Roop Kanwar’s character and her choices.

The willingness of the widow in her decision is still a major issue with modern women’s activists. “Opponents [of sati] argue that it is not possible to speak about a ‘free will’ of women in traditional Hindu society, because they have been taught not to make any decisions in their life by themselves.”¹⁸ Madhu Kishwar furthers this discussion with attitudes of modern women toward their own status. In *Manushi’s* report on Roop’s death, a prominent Rajasthani public figure, Rani Chundawat asks, “Given women’s general powerlessness, lack of control over their own lives, and definition of their status by their relationship to men (as daughters, wives, widows, mothers),

¹⁶ Oldenburg, 101-102.

¹⁷ Ibid, 101.

¹⁸ Lourens P. van den Bosch, “A Burning Question: Sati and Sati Temples as the Focus of Political Interest”, *Numen* Vol. 37, No. 2 (December 1990),186.

can any decision of theirs, particularly such a momentous decision [of sati], really be called voluntary and self-chosen?”¹⁹ This issue, whether a woman is willing or is the victim of murder, which Rammohan Roy struggled with in the 1800s and which opponents of sati still discuss today provides a conduit between early Indian feminism and women’s advocacy as it exists in modern India.

Hinduism is certainly not a closed doctrine, making it difficult to justify one tradition as a rule for a whole gender or nation. It is also my understanding that the structures of religion are not fixed or static in the discourse of sati. Sati, itself, is represented as a structure of women’s place in society both religiously and politically. However, it is not possible to divide the two, turning sati into purely a gender issue or purely a religious one; just as *The Home and the World* can provide valuable sociological insights beyond its literary nature, and *Mother India* influencing culture beyond the cinematic and entertainment world.

Roop’s death is considered an important event from different structures, for example, traditional religious sentiment of the community, or from the opposite stance of Roop as a symbol for existing women’s issues as seen from the eyes of feminists. “Sati cannot be understood as a singular, unchanging phenomenon. Rather, it must be articulated in terms of specific cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors that form varied and

¹⁹ Kishwar, Madhu. *Off the Beaten Track: Rethinking Gender Justice for Indian Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64.

contingent configurations.”²⁰ Once again, Roop Kanwar’s sati must be considered in the contours of dynamic and overlapping structures, just as how *Mother India* and *The Home and the World* can be continually reexamined from different perspectives and period contexts.

Narendra Singh Rajawat, president of the Rajput Maha Sabha, said, “It is the press which is responsible for trying to degrade this [sati]. It has forced the government to get really active in this matter.”²¹ Yet another reaction to the press shows the suspicion that proponents of sati, especially, had, implying either that they felt that sati was such a personal tradition that the press could not portray it correctly, or that they felt there was something to hide in the case of Roop Kanwar’s death. Furthermore, the high volume of print about this particular sati shows the importance the event had in the context of community, state, national, and global affairs, and that its effect is worth examining in the larger picture of postcolonial history and politics in India.

Women’s groups were immediately in uproar over Roop’s death. Their petitions to the government and efforts to mobilize political opinion against sati played a major role in the changing of perceptions in Roop’s death and the issue of sati as a symbol for India. After the sati, feminists were continually outraged at what they felt was failure on the government’s part to control the glorification of what they felt was murder.

²⁰ Courtright and Goswami, 210-211.

²¹ *Trial by Fire*, 12.

Proponents of sati also turned out in force: “At a six-hour rally in Jaipur in mid-October (1987), some 70,000 Rajasthanis were reported to have turned up...chanting ‘Dharam ki raksha kaun karega, hum karenge, hum karenge’ (Who will safeguard our religion? We will, we will).”²² Immediately following the event, sati supporters significantly outnumbered feminists. “[Women’s] movements were not in a position to carry the same political weight as their opponents. There was no question of a mass movement. When women’s organizations led a silent march in Jaipur on 6 October 1987 to protest the burning of Roop Kanwar, they were able to mobilize only about 3,000 people. Two days later their opponents marched with about 70,000 people.”²³ Because of such evidence of loyalty to tradition, accounts which attempt to strip sati of its religious meaning and make it purely into a gender issue must be considered critically.

Perhaps the most significant role played by the feminists was to push the government toward action. The Jamadi Mahila Samiti (Women’s Popular Council) made repeated efforts to abolish sati through the government. Ultimately, the campaigning of this group led to a change in the legal code of Rajasthan, then of India.²⁴ On 1 October 1987, the State government promulgated the Rajasthan Sati (Prevention) Ordinance, 1987. Following a

²² Sakuntala Narasimhan, *Sati: Widow Burning in India* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1992), 5.

²³ John Stratton Hawley, “Hinduism: Sati and Its Defenders”, in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 87.

²⁴ Catherine A. Robinson, *Tradition and Liberation: The Hindu Tradition in the Indian Women’s Movement* (Surrey: Cuzon Press, 1999), 177.

demand made for a strong and effective Central Act, the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Bill, 1987, making attempt to commit, abetment, and glorification of sati punishable, was introduced and passed in both Houses of Parliament.

Sati is both a personal act and a religious rite for Hindu women. It can give them power: “the female from her firmness of mind offers to burn with the corpse of her dead husband.”²⁵ The act allowed women an opportunity for “heroism and resolve,” and gave them a chance to exemplify “women’s strength of mind and character.”²⁶ Even modern feminists recognize the draw to sati: “Women themselves perpetuate, accept, and encourage traditions of the past”²⁷ – they find strength in the ability to accept whatever life has to offer in a patriarchal world. This ambiguity women feel toward these traditions reflects the dichotomy that exists in modern-day India. There are two views of the Hindu woman: “a ‘traditional’ discourse in which she is celebrated as *matri shakti* [strong Hindu woman]; and a ‘modern’ discourse in which she is the bearer of rights.”²⁸ Because women were worshipped after sati, others felt suicide was their own commemoration of a life subject to back-doors and silence in a world dominated by men – sati was and is, for

²⁵ Rammohun Roy, “In Defense of Hindu Women” in *Sources of Indian Tradition, 2nd Ed.*, ed. Stephen Hay (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 27.

²⁶ Lata Mani, “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India” in *Cultural Critique, No. 7, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II*. (University of Minnesota Press, (1987)), 139.

²⁷ Kishwar, 176.

²⁸ Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia. *Women and Right-Wing Movements: Indian Experiences* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1995), 104.

women, either a suppression of their rights or an expression of them, or perhaps both.

Ruth Vanita and Madhu Kishwar visited Deorala in the last week of October in 1987. Their observances of Roop Kanwar's sati support this view – that an insight into the character of sati-worship may be more than simply religious fervor. “In a culture where a woman is considered a burden, easily dispensable and replaceable, it is a rare woman who is honored in her death...Roop Kanwar's glorification may even appear some sort of acknowledgement, however bizarre, of the many unrewarded sacrifices women make in everyday life for husband and family.”²⁹

Endorsing suicide, according to feminists, exchanges responsibility for the deaths from traditional virtue and passion for fidelity to a complicated network of societal pressures, particularly those from the families of the widow and of her husband. The families were concerned with upholding the honorable memory of their son and avoiding the probability that a single woman “may be guilty of such acts as may bring disgrace upon her paternal and maternal relations.”³⁰ This view suggests that philosophies and scripture used to justify the death of widows are tainted with the blood of women who obeyed society's call for adherence to traditional values. Though the desire to end her life may come from devotion to her spouse and religious obedience, a woman is burned by first removing “every chance of their trying to escape

²⁹ Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita. “The Burning of Roop Kanwar,” *Manushi*, (Sep – Dec. 1987), 15-25.

³⁰ Roy, 26.

from the blazing fire [and] in burning them we first tie them down to the pile.”³¹ Society’s willingness to commit institutionalized murder, which Roy and Bentinck wrestled with in the mid-1800s, still appears in modern literature of contemporary women’s activists: “If the wide-spread implicit acceptance of wife-murder in our society today expresses the low value set on women’s lives, the public burning to death of a woman is an open endorsement of that devaluation.”³²

In 1987, the opponents of the custom were seen as “intellectuals corrupted by decadent Western ideas, who had no support among the people and did not understand their feelings and concerns.”³³ Proponents of sati were affronted by government interference in what they believed were their inherent religious rights. This hostility is both a manifestation of existing structures as well as a transformation of views toward government. After 1987, traditionalists saw the Westernized government as betrayal of Indian culture. According to Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, however, feminists did not think much more of the government than their counterparts did. Though they achieved another abolition of sati, they did not feel it was enough. Even Indira Gandhi, the first female prime minister of India, stated, “Our government, by its skillful use of progressive rhetoric, has convinced reformers that even though it may be weak and ineffective, it is ultimately on

³¹ Ibid, 26.

³² Kishwar, 1999, 55.

³³ Fisch, 451.

the side of progress.”³⁴ Although much can be done to view iconic women on a more intimate, individual level, we can see how Roop Kanwar is a major example of how one character portrayed in an event, film, or book can come to represent entire religions, governments, and communities just through the symbolic nature of their actions.

If Roop committed sati with the intention of gaining glory, it worked – to a certain extent. For some, she was a sati mata – a goddess removed from the everyday heartaches of marriage and childbirth, but who understood them nonetheless. For others, she represented religious power, transcendent earthly politics. Others saw her as a victim of ancient rites for the benefit of an unchanged patriarchal society in a modern world.

³⁴ Ibid, 451.

CONCLUSION

These three examples, if treated as separate entities in the conversation about women, miss the valuable insight that can come from examining common threads. There is perhaps an irony in the cyclical repression of individuality for these women, who are viewed as symbols, yet struggle with their own definitions of duty. Women's identities in the 20th century are created alternately as a backlash in different ways against the assertion of Western ideals, tradition, or nationalism. And though women's place in Indian society has in many ways come to the forefront of political and social protests, it seems that the definition of where women stand is still uncertain across the board. What may seem surprising to the outside world when viewing India, is that beyond scholarly opinions, another iconic Indian figure herself was often concerned with how women were defined and treated in the modern world, despite the seeming victory of women in politics due to her own place. In 1975, years before Roop Kanwar's controversial death in an illegal and seemingly outdated rite, Indira Gandhi stated:

“Until a few years ago, our women were burdened with unjust social laws and customs. Under the Constitution, our women have equal rights. An increasing number of them are participating in every sphere of public life. New laws attempt to reinterpret ancient laws in terms of

modern trends. Even so, women have a long way to go. Much has to be done to arouse public consciousness.”¹

Ruchira Ganguli-Scrase, in her 2003 ethnological article on gender equality, discusses how the media “highlights the complexities of what constitutes the ‘new woman’,”² and uses personal responses from Indian women to understand how media representations of women change their ideas of gender equality and empowerment. In an interesting foray into the general culture of consumerism and economic liberalization, Ganguli-Scrase analyzes the implications of women in the workforce on the traditional family and individual. According to her research, most respondents “felt that feminist and other emancipatory discourses of collective advancement seem overly abstract.”³ Indeed, continuing the themes illuminated in the analysis of *The Home and the World*, *Mother India*, and the controversy of Roop Kanwar, women are still, after hundreds of years of “modernization,” “struggling with the dichotomous messages of ideologies and have attempted to reconcile them in their daily lives.”⁴ One of her younger respondents working as a telephone assistant stresses the necessity of individual independence for women: “I want every woman to stand on her own two feet. She should not be dependent on anyone.” However, according to further research, “despite the positive appraisal of women’s employment, there is still

¹ Indira Gandhi, *Indira Gandhi: Speeches and Writings* (Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc, New York: 1975), 46-47.

² Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase, “Paradoxes of Globalization, Liberalization, and Gender Equality,” (*Gender and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Aug. 2003)), 548.

³ *Ibid*, 553.

⁴ *Ibid*, 554.

only a narrow range of work options available to women.”⁵ Reflected in the previous iconic female representations in this paper, despite long-championed views of individual independence and modernity, women are not widely successful outside of their traditional spheres.

Bimala underwent significant self-exploration and discovery separate from her husband’s ideals, but her certainty of her place and her marriage were destroyed as a result. Radha survived hardship on her own and upheld her moral character as an independent woman, but she still lived in poverty and killed her son because of her own sense of honor. Roop Kanwar died within the confines of a very traditional life, despite her education and modern identity, becoming a symbol without a voice. The confusion and dichotomy of today’s expectations of women in a modern world are more and more relevant in the context of icons that perpetuate conflicting ideals.

India is uniquely shaped by symbols of its past, and that past alters and transforms in order to fit with new values and global ideas. Within their family life, women must be negotiators, teachers, and helpmeets. They must be loving, persuasive, manipulative, sacrificial, meek, humble, assertive, and feminine – all under the cloak of a private, hidden sphere. More and more, modern Indian women are breaking into careers and more public roles previously molded for men only. However, the expectation is that they must push forward and represent modernism, all while still wearing a sari, defending the family, and teaching traditional values. They are still seen as

⁵ Ibid, 558.

responsible for the last defense of motherhood, marriage, and the nation. Despite a globalizing trend in India, the three iconic representations of women described above show how certain traditional values have been ingrained in the culture, and become dynamic threads influencing women's actions in many different spheres. There is a utility of focusing closely on these constructions to fill out not just the historical narrative of women, but also to use as a lens for the future. The ideals portrayed here in their various compositions, demonstrate the viscosity of cultural icons, which all can become a part of a new discourse and conversation about the definition of womanhood and its future path.

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