THE INDIAN FEMALE BODY IN THE HANDS OF EMPIRE: VICTORIAN INFLUENCES ON INDIAN WOMEN'S ENGLISH WRITING AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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his paper is concerned with the ways in which Victorian feminist ideologies affected Indian women's literary representations of female eroticism at the turn of the twentieth century. It will concentrate on the autobiography and fiction of two pioneer authors of the Indian women's English literary tradition. But first a short introduction to the pre-colonial Indian woman's erotic writing is necessary so that readers can appreciate why, and to what extent, Victorian women's ideologies altered the Indian woman's psyche and consequently her writing of the body.

Pre-colonial Representations: "From *Prakriti* to *Pativrata*"

In ancient India, as in most agricultural societies, the female was central to indigenous religious and social ideologies. She personified nature (*prakriti*) and as such could be both constructive and destructive, that is, abundantly fertile, nurturing and benevolent *and* aggressive and tempestuous. Correspondingly, ancient Indian art and sculpture represented the female body in splendid maturity. Power was implied by vigorous, stalwart bodies in impressive and independent postures; fertility was suggested by generous breasts and hips. The facial expressions communicate an extra-ordinary sense of fearlessness, self-confidence and self-awareness. It is important to note, as Ananda Coomaraswamy explains, "there is scarcely a single female figure represented in early Indian art without erotic suggestion of some kind, implied or explicitly expressed and emphasised" (Mehta 3). It is also significant that in the ancient sculptures and paintings that depict lovers, the woman's involvement with her lover is clearly expressed. This is particularly interesting when compared with traditional European paintings in which the lover, if he is in the painting, is generally a spectator, regarding the woman from a distance like an artist or voyeur: she is separate from himself. Generally, in this style the image of the woman is frontal. In ancient Indian art and sculpture, on the other hand, the lovers are oblivious of an audience. The woman is an active and strong partner in the relationship (Berger 51). She is not an object under male surveillance but a subject: her body enacts her own life, thoughts and self.

This tradition was somewhat submerged by the strongly patriarchal Aryan civilisation which began around 1700 BC and which imposed a subaltern identity on the female. It repressed woman-power and substituted modesty, submissiveness and duty. It submerged her sensual, sexual identity and conditioned her to believe that she was born for nothing else but procreation. It forced her into male submission in every way. All Aryan literature, religious and secular, celebrated the *pativrata* (husband worshipper) and the mother image, and derided any female quality that could threaten male-supremacy. Gradually, prohibitions on female education and widow remarriage were imposed, and *parda*, child marriage and polygamy were institutionalised. Those women who resisted them went into religious life or became courtesans; through them the women's literary tradition continued until the establishment of Empire.

Lack of space confines my introduction to pre-colonial Indian women's representation of the erotic experience to a brief, general overview of the *Bhakti* (religious) and courtesan poetry of the medieval period (from c.AD 800). The *Bhaktas* were wandering poet-saints: rebellious women who sought self-fulfilment in religious life after rejecting an arranged marriage, a disillusioning marital relationship, domestic drudgery or enforced widowhood. Religious life was generally the only socially sanctioned route of escape available to women who were ill-fated enough not to be domesticated as wives. The courtesans were often born into the profession and were traditionally the only women who had access to scholarship. They were also well-versed in fine arts, music, and dancing. It is important to note that during these times Indian courtesans held a prestigious place in public life and were respected for their learning. In their poetry, the poets, whether *Bhaktas* or courtesans, embrace the personae of the wife/lover/devotee of a personally chosen husband/lover/God. From about AD 1200, a popular personae was that of the legendary Radha, the wife of a cowherd who had an adulterous relationship with Krishna: a human manifestation of God Vishnu in Hindu mythology. Although in real life extra-marital relationships were considered contemptible, the *imagined* adultery of the *Bhaktas*, strongly flavoured by the divine element, was more acceptable.

The poet's relationship with her lover, Krishna, is primarily one of erotic-religious pleasure. On one hand, the *Bhakti* poetry reiterates the woman's role of the subaltern *pativrata*, on the other, it repudiates this subordinate role. When Krishna deserts her repeatedly for his other lovers, the poet faithfully awaits his return like Radha. She is the arid earth, burning with desire for him. He is the rain that can rejuvenate and make her whole. She receives sustenance from him; without him she is nothing. He is the God, she his devotee; he thus belongs to a higher realm. The poem of the medieval twelfth-century Kannada poet, rebel and mystic, Akkamahadevi, "It was like a stream . . ." furnishes an example (Tharu 77). The interesting feature of this relationship, and the one that distinguishes it from the traditional role-model, is the woman's expression of her sexuality and her active participation in the sexual relationship. In the *Bhakti* poems of Mirabai (24-25)

and those of Akkamahadevi, Madhupalini and others (Tharu 76-127), for instance, she is no longer the traditional passive vessel patiently awaiting her husband's pleasure, but a demanding, at times even aggressive partner who is "maddened" by love, wounded by separation from her beloved and yearning to be reunited with him. In the sequence of verses *Radhika Santwanam* ("Appeasing Radhika"), by the eighteenth-century courtesan poet Madhupalani, the woman's position within the relationship is even more significant. Unlike her representation within the dominant Aryan patriarchy, where she was always depicted as the object of male gaze, desire and power, in this imagined adulterous sexual relationship she is an equal, at times even the superior partner, consciously *seeking* sexual fulfilment. In the guise of Krishna, the narrator of the poem "If I ask her not to kiss me . . ." relates how Radha playfully but forcefully initiates sexual intercourse, describes his compliance, and how she "makes love" to him "again and again" until she is satiated (Tharu 120). This suggests the reversal of gender roles which is sometimes highlighted in Radha-Krishna paintings (*Glimpses* 25) and, interestingly, even foreshadows Virginia Woolf's Orlando-Shelmadine relationship in *Orlando*. The natural consequence seems to have been a perfect moment of being.

The sense of a woman's *jouissance* fills the poetry. However, to limit the denouement of the narrator's sexual desire as *jouissance*, if *jouissance* is explained as orgasmic pleasure, would give it too fleeting, too transient a meaning. The denouement of sexual desire in this poetry reaches beyond the physical and can be defined as the "*jouissance* of being" that Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan have conceptualised: a source of pleasure and self-realisation (Mitchell 137-48). At last, in the imagined idealised erotic-religious relationship with God Krishna, she/Radha/woman, *is*: she attains her unfulfilled desires, all that she was denied in her conventional domestic life. She becomes complete in herself.

Nor can the significance of the divine element be ignored. Philip Rawson explains that "the aim of Indian erotic life . . . is not merely orgasm, but the experience of enhanced sexual conjunction, that divine afflatus for its own sake. And this experience is both aesthetic for its own sake as well as a legitimate mode of religious release" (Mehta 11). Similarly, for the *Bhaktas*, human sexual intimacy in the final analysis "becomes a metaphor for the phases of mystic ascent" (Ramanujan 113-14). Sexual experience is not an end in itself but the means to a metaphysical and transcendental state. As Akkamahadevi says: "It was like this world's pleasure and the way to the other" (Tharu 77). Thus, ultimately the imagined sexual experience culminates for the *Bhaktas* and the courtesans in self-fulfilment and self-realisation, and for the *Bhaktas*, if less for the courtesans, in a nirvanic state.

Colonial Representations: Indian-Victorian Angels in the House

Now from these realms of fantasy as self-realisation, let us plummet to earth and to imperial India of the nineteenth century. The colonisers changed the Hindu ways of seeing the female body and the sexual experience. They introduced and

developed the official opinion that India was in a tragic state of degeneration, inundated with barbaric and heathen practices. Judging by their own Christian and Victorian values, so different from those of the indigenous culture, the British viewed the indigenous as inferior, "backward, degenerate, uncivilised and retarded," which required their superior, progressive and strong arm to redeem, reconstruct and civilise it (Said 207). They considered the erotic-religious and secular literature in India as licentious and recast it; parts of Maddupalani's *Radhika Santwanam* were even banned because they could endanger the "moral health of their Indian subjects" (Tharu 3-4).[1]

The British also re-constructed the Hindu *pativrata* in the image of the Victorian Angel in the House. By the turn of the twentieth century, a few high-caste and high-class Indian women metamorphosed from the humble *pativrata* to Indian-Victorian Angels in the House. They were educated in the English tradition, and some converted to Christianity. They stepped out of *parda* and rejected child and infant marriages arranged by parents. They opted for mutual love and companionship in marriage and were transformed from husband worshippers to husbands' celestial companions. Their ideal was entrenched in the ideologies of earlier Victorian women who aspired to develop women's reasoning faculties to render them better equipped to fulfil their duties as wives and mothers as intelligent companions to their husbands and sound moral guardians to their children. A few more radically minded women believed that marriage stifled female mental and psychical development and opted for the independence that spinsterhood and full-time careers offered.

A few of these adopted daughters of the empire pioneered the Indian women's English literary tradition. And like the *Bhakti* and courtesan poetry discussed above, their fiction resisted and opposed the Aryan patriarchal institutionalised ideologies that repressed women. However, where the pre-colonial poets had resorted to an erotic-religious experience for sexual release as a source of self-realisation, these women looked to Victorian feminist ideologies that considered the development of the *mind* as a source of self-knowledge.

The first Indian woman writer of English fiction was Krupabai Satthianadhan (1862-1894), the daughter of the first Hindu converts to Christianity in the Bombay Presidency. According to her autobiographical novel *Saguna*, Satthianadhan grew up a devout Christian and received a western-style education which developed in her the need for individuality, self-reliance and self-choice. However, while she excelled in her studies, she was prevented from pursuing them overseas because she suffered from a weak constitution and because contemporary male Indian culture was prejudiced against overseas scholarship for women. Satthianadhan compensated for this by entering the Madras Medical College as its first woman student. Although she stood highest in her class at the end of her first

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[1] I am indebted to Tharu and Lalita for their overview of ancient and Indian women's literature. I have incorporated or extended many of their views in the first section of this paper.

year, a nervous breakdown terminated her formal education for good and cut short her aspirations of independence. Her nervous breakdown can be viewed almost as a *rite of passage* from girlhood to womanhood. She had to suppress her active ego in order to produce a modest, submissive woman. The woman in this case was symbolic of her society. During her convalescence, Satthianadhan's "restless and untamed" spirit found refuge in the heart of a Christian missionary whom she married. She became his companion and help-mate and devoted herself to missionary work, teaching in Christian schools and writing in her spare time.[2]

In *Saguna*, and in another novel, *Kamala,* Satthianadhan attempts to further the civilising mission of the coloniser: to repudiate *parda*, child-marriage, *sati*, enforced widowhood and the prohibition of female education as impediments to female self-development. Through the advocacy of Christianity and Western education, she attempts to lift the Hindu woman out of what she felt was bigotry, ignorance and narrow mindedness, low desires and thoughts which could only denigrate her husband, and to develop her into a "generous minded noble woman, with intellectual tastes and sensibilities, [who could] support all that [was] noble and good in her husband, encourage his higher thoughts and aspirations and be a real help-mate to him in his everyday life" (9). This is surely a replication of the Victorian concept of the "perfect lady": Satthianadhan's concepts are identical to the polemics of the earliest of Victorian feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) and to others, like John Ruskin (74) and Adams Davenport (43), who espoused the same ideas with equal enthusiasm throughout the nineteenth century. Satthianadhan even quotes from Davenport's book *Woman's Work and Worth* in order to pursue her own idea of the "new woman" in India, reiterating her rootedness in British Victorianism and maintaining that, "in the excellent work by Mr. A. Davenport on *Woman's Work and Worth* we find a true description of what a wife ought to be, and what she is in the civilised west. How much does the Hindu wife fall short of this ideal" (9).

There is no place for sexuality in Satthianadhan's heroines. Pre-marital romance introduced to her through western literature and western lifestyle figures somewhat prominently in *Saguna* but is deeply tinged with Christianity. There is but one fleeting moment of physical contact between the narrator and her fiancé in the whole book—and that's the chaste kiss with which they pledge their love for each other, and for God. Satthianadhan's love for her husband is pure and asexual, based on an affinity of spirit and intellect, a total absence of sexual passion. In *Kamala*, the protagonist falls in love with her husband and there is a fleeting suggestion of her sexual awakening couched in romantic and poetic terms.[3] What seems to be much more important is her self-development through literacy.

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[2] For a more detailed biographical account of Krupabai Satthianadhan, see Lokugé, "The Cross Cultural Experience of a Pioneer Indian Woman Writer of English Fiction" (102-116).

[3] Swarnakumari Ghosal's *An Unfinished Song* (1913) also deals with pre-marital romance in such poetic terms. See Lokugé, "Between Femininity and Feminism" (45-58).

The only character in Satthianadhan's books who rejects the model of wife as the husband's companion and supporter is Sai in *Kamala*, and she is severely chastised by the author because she strays from chastity in the attempt to release her repressed desires. One of the ways in which she seeks release is through a forbidden sexual relationship: adultery. Unlike the pre-colonial *Bhakti* literature, here the adulterous relationship is not sought in the mystical Radha-Krishna legend, but with a human lover. Thus morality comes into question. As Leslie Stephen would have commented, "respectability spreads its leaden mantle" over the whole issue. Sai is a foil to the protagonist Kamala, who is the chaste heroine and faithful wife and mother. An extremely attractive woman physically, and one who has deserted her husband for an adulterous relationship, Sai is caste in the mould of the "other," the monster woman, whose sensuality and sexual drives attract and destroy all men. Interestingly, Sai's sexuality is inextricably linked with her mental development and psychical independence. What the writer deliberately attempts to convey is that all, or any, of these unorthodox personality developments are destructive when they are not harnessed to the yoke of marriage. They bode evil if they are sought for the satisfaction of the woman's own inner needs, as a way of releasing her lack, her suppressed self. Sai is spurned for personifying the destructive dimension of womanhood, for cunningly harbouring the evil serpent within her. Sai herself regrets her education, her independence and her sexual promiscuity. Yet even while upholding a prudent moral view, Satthianadhan admits, albeit palimpsestically, her secret admiration for the sinful woman's intelligence, independence and strength of character through one of her male characters:

> Do you see now the difference between being educated and uneducated? Whom would you like to have as a wife? A simple, innocent modest girl afraid to open her mouth [Kamala], or a bold, clever woman wielding such a dreadful power over others as this woman [Sai] wields? Yet it is education that has made her what she is. She was dissatisfied with her home and her stupid loutish husband, and rumour has it that she poisoned him. . . . She has learnt to her heart's content and now she excels any man in accounts, and as for reading character no philosopher even could equal her. She is independent as a queen. (92)

Regarded from a modern feminist perspective, the dramatisation of Sai, the "written woman," the rebellious and liberated female, as the other, the eccentric, ostracised by society and rejected even by herself, suggests the self-division of the "writing woman." One of Gilbert and Gubar's feminist psychological patterns applies to Satthianadhan's condition. It is that the "fiercely independent" female character of women's literature, who is categorised as a "monster" or "mad woman," and who seeks to "destroy all the patriarchal structures which both their

authors and their authors' submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable," is in fact an integral part of the woman-writer's inner self, "the author's double" which the author herself guiltily repudiates in favour of a modest submissive daughter/wife/mother identity. Through this "mad woman," female authors "dramatise their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them" (77-79). If Sai in *Kamala* is a diluted version of the monster mad woman of nineteenth-century western women's literature, such as Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, for example, she is also recognisable as the hidden fragment of the writer's ignored/censored deeper self. Sai is forced into submission during her nervous breakdown and thus denied the power of independence in the real world, "wavering between the will to release and the desire to hold back." Thus, through writing the body (and lack of body) of her characters, the woman author is really writing of herself: her inner life, her plurality, her conditioning and her desires.[4]

In Cornelia Sorabji's (1866-1954) short stories about women in *parda*, Victorian prejudice against female sensuality and eroticism is even more heavily underlined. A Parsee by race and a Christian, she was one of the first Indian women to read for her degree at Oxford University. Her autobiography shows just how much she was influenced by western literature, education, style of life and people. She returned to India from the west as a fully fledged Victorian feminist. She is more the radical feminist of the Florence Nightingale type who sought psychical independence without submitting to the restrictions of marriage, unlike Satthianadhan who believed in the milder Victorian concept of the "perfect lady." There are two plausible reasons for this: one is that Sorabji actually lived in England and was directly in contact with feminists like Nightingale and Bernard Shaw, unlike Satthianadhan, whose feminism was inspired and nurtured by British missionaries in India and by western literature. The other is that Sorabji belonged to the westernised Indian-Parsee community, and as such was comparatively less restricted than Satthianadhan, who belonged to the extremely conservative community of Hindus.

British feminists in nineteenth-century India criticised *parda* as an institution that could aggravate female incarceration, and condemned it as a form of claustrophobic domesticity leading to the "starvation of the body and starvation of the mind." The missionaries in nineteenth-century India were among the strongest critics of *parda*. Reverend Storrow, for instance, described *pardanashins* as excessively sensual women trapped in an unredeemed femininity and sexuality and self-perpetuated stasis: "the sure victims of ennui," "languid, licentious, lounging on couches, listening to gossip fanned by servants, or having their arms and limbs rubbed" (Borthwick 16, 20). A missionary visitor to a Calcutta *zenana* described it

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[4] For a sensitive exploration of the writing woman's guilt and her inhibitions about writing her secret self see Trinh (21-23).

as a neglected habitat of exhausted women imprisoned within themselves in a deathly passivity (7).

Sorabji whole-heartedly shared these British views. She also shared their notion that female mental development and psychical maturity were essential for self-fulfilment, and as a basis for a rewarding and lasting man-woman relationship. In many of her short stories, she derides female physical beauty and sensuality as impeding self-development, and scorns *pardanashins* who, according to her, devoted all their time to beauty treatment and lived passive, lethargic lives awaiting just one duty: the satisfaction of their husband's sexual desires. Her heroine, and there is only *one* Hindu heroine in all the short stories based on Hindu *pardanashins* in her book *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*, is an independent young woman who is sacrificed by her family for political reasons and forced to become the fourth wife of an Indian Raj. As a result, she must surrender to the restrictions of *parda*. She has no physical attractions, a factor which Sorabji emphasises: the woman is plain and squint-eyed, much to the astonishment and confusion of the once beautiful earlier wives who considered physical beauty to be the only female attraction for the male. But educated and well-travelled, the fourth wife seems to attract and effortlessly retain her husband's favour more permanently than the first three wives with their beautiful faces and seductive bodies. In her title story, "Behind the Purdah," she identifies closely with the narrator Miss Rebecca Yeastman, a middle-aged British spinster of masculine demeanour and independent spirit excluded from love and sexual passion. The name Yeastman is itself suggestive of masculinity. Miss Yeastman, a medical practitioner, visits a *zenana* to treat a secluded *Rani* (one of the many wives of an Indian *Raja*). Thus she gains access into the interior of the *zenana* which is generally prohibited to strangers. Part of the story is divulged through Miss Rebecca's letters to her friend Marian, a British feminist who lives in London. Marian's room and her personality are admiringly described in minute detail by Sorabji. The room positively glows with a creative energy that has been sparked by life, art and literature. It is a worker's niche. Its occupant is a strong-featured woman whose passionate involvement with life is suggested by the dynamic themes depicted in the paintings which adorn her walls, and by the jonquils that let in the freshness and vitality of the outside world. Like her room, she exudes creative purpose, strong individuality and an aura of intellectual emancipation. Sorabji's focus here is certainly on the woman's inward life, not on the woman's body as the object of male gaze and desire:

> It certainly does look like a student's room, and a woman's—this! Prints of Rubens and Nicolas Poussin, of Cuyp and William Hunt, of Burne-Jones and Rossetti, Madonnas and bacchanal orgies, Dutch sunsets and beggar boys, hang in impartial selection and appropriate setting, against the Morris-papered walls. One end of the room is lined with deep-browed tomes, of

> a scientific and medical aspect; a writing table in the spacious bow-window betrays an air of recent requisition, softly cushioned lounges invite unstudious repose; within easy reach are picture-papers and the latest poem. She reads sheets of closely written foreign paper. (152)

The oppressive, and slovenly condition of the *Rani*'s chamber and the *Rani*'s body is in direct contrast to the intellectually stimulating and vibrant atmosphere that characterises Marian's room:

> The room was large and square, with windows too high for purposes of outlook, and closely barred against all use as ventilators. On the floor was a gaudy Western carpet. . . . In the centre of the room stood a high silver bedstead. . . . On the floor sat women of varying ages, some shaven and without ornament, others caparisoned gaily enough all in rich dark reds and blues of the Kathiawad saree. They were moving their bodies to and fro to a monotonous Gregorian wail. . . . Among tumbled bedclothes, rich silks, and cotton sheets, lay, fully dressed and bejewelled, a snug, sleek, decently featured Indian lady. Her skin was beautifully smooth, and under her lashes were the accustomed artificial shadows, the material *absit omen* of the nation. One plump hand lay lazily across the clothes, and you saw that the nails were well kept and dyed with the brilliant menhdi; the other hand grasped pettishly the short thick throat. (145-46)

The picture Sorabji paints here is of an unhealthy prison-like enclosure. The image of the woman is frontal: she is an exhibited object directly subjected to the male-like fascination of the narrator. Further, Sorabji's representation of the *pardanashin*'s body, and her interpretation of it, bear unmistakable symptoms of that colonial malaise: the fascination with, and criticism of, the exotic other. However, the critical voice of British Victorian prudery subdues fascination. Sorabji's emphasis is on a lethargic sluggish femininity—on the women's claustrophobic clothing and lassitude, on the *Rani*'s fatigued body lying among unkempt sheets, on her heavy facial make-up, apathetic hands and bejewelled fingers; all of it suggestive of a pathetic dependence on sensuality as the only way to male attention. The visual image constructed here of a helpless and unsatiated female sexuality is a far cry from the traditional pre-colonial image of woman's sexual power. It is obvious that the occupants of this room are debilitated into a physical and intellectual stasis. As though to elaborate this, Sorabji describes the quotidian sensual activities of the *pardanashins* and the mental torpor that, in her opinion, resulted from such "trivial" occupation. "What do the ladies do all day,

you ask? Quarrel? No, they are too lethargic for any such activity. Most of them turn over and fondle their lovely jewels and silk garments" (158).

The typical husbands in all Sorabji's stories are Indian Princes with busy public lives, who retire, slightly bored each night, to the *zenanas* for sexual pleasure. They are insensitive to anything but their own narcissistic needs. Once they tire of the body of their current favourite, they look for erotic pleasure elsewhere. They remarry, or take a concubine. The neglected wives yawn their lives away in the *zenana*, their bodies running to fat, their minds void of all but the memories of what had been. They gossip and plot against the new, physically more attractive wife and even attempt to poison her. The current favourite (but for the squint-eyed heroine of the earlier story) is shown to be obsessed with her physical attributes, one whose sole purpose in life is to enhance her sensuality for her husband's pleasure. Both in her fiction and prose, Sorabji emphasises the transience of sexual passion and its ineffectiveness as a basis for a man/woman relationship. She makes a conscious effort to rescue her *pardanashins* from themselves and to instil in them her strongly held Victorian convictions of physical, mental and psychical independence. It is worth noting that in reality not all *zenanas* were as intellectually stifling and physically claustrophobic as those fictionalised by Sorabji. For instance, in the wealthier and more lenient families in Bengal, *pardanashins* organised the reading of the epics and *puranas*, and even of secular body literature, as for example, the *Bidyasundar* (an erotic eighteenth-century masterpiece composed by the poet Bharat Chandra) in their homes. The fact that Sorabji ignores all this only places her more firmly within a western feminist discourse on Hindu *pardanashins* which conceived them as saturated in sensuality and in need of the coloniser, whose mouthpiece she is, to rouse them from their misguided reverie. It can also be concluded that, entrenched in some Victorian women's ideologies, Sorabji, like Satthianadhan, has the aspiration to turn the reader's gaze from the woman's body as the object of male sexual desire and the subject of her own sexuality, to the woman's mind and self, in which both authors strongly believed lay the source of her liberation from a subaltern position within the patriarchy.

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