

Imperialism and the Construction of Third World Woman in Mircea Eliade's *Bengal Nights*: A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

This study analyzes Mircea Eliade's autobiographical novel *Bengal Nights* (1933) to shed light on the orientalisation and eroticization of its character Devi as an emblem of colonial India. Drawing on Spivak's subaltern studies and Mohanty's critique of Western feminism, the article interrogates how British imperialist ideologies exploited the knowledge-power nexus to deny voice and agency to colonized women. Eliade's depiction of Devi, closely modeled on his real-life encounter with a famous Indian author whose name he does not even disguise, presents the imperialist hierarchies that portray colonised cultures as backward, irrational, and inferior. It is further argued that *Bengal Nights* features what Spivak calls the imperialist mission of 'worlding,' i.e., defining colonized nations as blank spots requiring European intervention to acquire cultural and historical legitimacy. By juxtaposing Devi's portrayal in the novel with that of her European foil, Jenny, the study demonstrates how imperialist discourses homogenize third-world women as a monolithic category, perpetuating racial, gendered, and cultural hierarchies. The analysis calls for a reconsideration of imperialist literature to address its role in sustaining colonial oppression and silencing since it highlights the enduring impact of British imperialism in India on the representation of the latter's women.

Keywords: Third World Women, *Bengal Nights*, Mircea Eliade, Post-Colonial Feminism, Imperialism.

Introduction

Spivak's article "Can the Subaltern Speak?"¹ is a foundation stone for postcolonial feminist theory, suggesting that Eastern/African women are triply downgraded under colonial rule; first, by the colonisers, then by white women, and lastly by their very patriarchal society, accountable for their subjugation and sufferings. Spivak maintains that: "The major project for me is to unlearn our privilege as our loss; however, personally disadvantaged we might be, we are still able to specify the problems of female specificity, and that is the beginning."² According to Sangeeta Ray, Spivak was the first Asian woman who challenged the Western notions of feminism and its totalising

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¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can Subaltern Speak?' *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, Edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Macmillan Education, 1988), pp. 271-316.

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 10.

patterns by proposing that non-Western feminist texts cannot be interpreted within the framework of the First World theories of feminism.³ Because the uncritical use of Western feminism would likely culminate in furthering the “current and continued subalternization of so-called third-world literatures.”⁴ Similarly Spivak suggests that Western versions of feminism do not solve the problems of third-world women. This feminism is a sort of Western patriarchy where one hegemonic ideology is replaced with another suppressing dogma.⁵ For Spivak, there is “no discursive continuity among women” and therefore, the prime task of feminist discourse should be the advocacy of situational anti-sexism based on “the recognition of the heterogeneity of the field, instead of positing some kind of woman’s subject, women’s figure” and “that kind of stuff” because “if you really want to trace the figure, then you should start looking elsewhere in the globe.”⁶ Ray has observed that “the white man’s burden was replaced by the white woman’s burden, and female characters of colour (those who bore the brunt of empire building) remained locked in the attic while white female characters were liberated to be read diversely to enable a critique of western patriarchy.”⁷

While discussing Spivak’s contribution toward the theory of postcolonial feminism, Ray asserts that her intelligent denunciation of Western feminism has allowed her “to think through the role and function of the informant, not just in colonial discourse, but in transnational feminism that repeatedly bypasses women who remain on the fringes of a present condition marked by nationalism, postcoloniality, and migration.”⁸ Spivak’s perspective on Western feminism is instrumental in tracing violent epistemic moves within territorial imperialism and with a durable commitment to eclectic feminism, she provides an excellent critique of “the erasure of the body and subjectivity of the colonial woman from the history of both imperial domination and colonial resistance.”⁹ Therefore, Spivak asks for such a critical practice which challenges the Western hegemonic discourse on nonwestern women:

One has to reverse the binary opposition, and today of course, since there is now a longing once again for the pure Other of the West, we post-colonial intellectuals are told that we are *too* Western, and what goes completely unnoticed is that our turn to the West is in response to a command, whereas the other is to an extent a desire marking the place of the management of a crisis.¹⁰

Mohanty also criticizes Western feminist texts for their homogeneous, reductive and presupposed perceptions about women in the third world. She objects to the very use of “Third World

³ Sangeeta Ray, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)

⁴ Ray, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*, p. 10.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts and A Critique of Imperialism’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1985), pp. 243-261.

⁶ Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogue*, pp. 57-58.

⁷ Ray, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*, p. 29.

⁸ Ray, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*, p. 3.

⁹ Ray, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*, p. 11.

¹⁰ Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogue*. p. 8.

Difference”¹¹ through which Western feminists colonise and appropriate the crucial conflicts and complexities based on religion, class, caste and culture concerning non-Western women. Mohanty denies the existence of any “universal patriarchal framework” that Western feminist scholarship “attempts to counter and resist.”¹² In Western feminism, the representation of third-world women as powerless, uneducated, family-bound, ignorant, uncivilised, and victims of patriarchy and colonialism, underscores that the cultural differences or territorial belongings have been grossly overlooked. Mohanty notes that “defining women primarily in terms of their object status”¹³ is central to Western feminism and the spontaneous outcome of such representation is that it renders the third-world women as a monolithic group devoid of any distinct taxonomies. Being wakeful to such an essentialist feminist paradigm, Mohanty recommends that “in the context of western women writing/studying women in the third world, such objectification (however benevolently motivated) needs to be both named and challenged.”¹⁴ Therefore, Claire Chambers and Susan Watkins emphatically uphold that Spivak’s *Three Women’s Texts* and Mohanty’s *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* are the groundbreaking works which developed a correlation between feminism and postcolonial theory by critiquing imperialism as well as Western feminist scholarship for the colonizing and universalizing tendencies in studying women of colour.¹⁵

In the novel, to Eliade’s imperialist gaze, Devi remained a mystery and therefore he embarked on to render her transparent to the European world. His Orientalizing observation informs us that her naked arms and their strange sombre brown colour are so disturbing and even “unfeminine” that her body resembles “the flesh of a goddess or a painted image rather than of a human,” likewise, Indian women are termed as “disgusting” and “dirty” who cast “curious impressions” on the novelist’s mind.¹⁶ Eliade’s enigmatizing sketch of Devi in particular and Indian women in general, explicitly invokes what Mohanty calls a “Third World Difference” based on appropriating the complexities and conflicts surrounding colonised races through a self-enacted imperialist discourse. It is this axiomatic discursive style of writing that according to Spivak is the hallmark of imperialist literature and therefore “the role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored.”¹⁷

According to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park, postcolonial feminism should not be simply considered a subclass of postcolonial studies or a variety of feminism.¹⁸ Rather, it is an intervention that has decisively transformed the patterns/structures of both feminist and postcolonial studies: “Postcolonial feminism is an exploration of and at the intersections of

¹¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, *Boundary 2*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1984), p. 335.

¹² Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, p. 335.

¹³ Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, p. 338.

¹⁴ Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, p. 338.

¹⁵ Claire Chambers and Susan Watkins, ‘Postcolonial Feminism?’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2012), pp. 297-30.

¹⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, Trans. Catherine Spencer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 2.

¹⁷ Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Text and A Critique of Imperialism’, p. 243.

¹⁸ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park, ‘Postcolonial Feminism/Postcolonialism and Feminism’, *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, eds Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in the different context of women's lives, their subjectivity, work, sexuality, and rights."¹⁹ Ann Laura Stoler hints at the networks between "beliefs about European manliness, racial membership, sexual morality and the management of empire"²⁰ while investigating intimate, domestic, and sexual provisions in erstwhile colonies. Leela Gandhi sees Western feminism as imprisoned for its imaginary vocalizations of the third-world woman as it obstructs the historical privileges of this character.²¹ Likewise, Margaret Walter points out the inefficacy of Western feminism in dealing with the issues of non-Western women. She dissects that one of the most famous feminist slogans, 'Sisterhood is powerful' has been effectively contested and questioned since its inception in the 1960s by feminist critics outside Europe: "White middle-class women often seem to be dictating a feminism that concentrates on gender discrimination, while tending to overlook, for example, the class differences and racial discrimination that complicate ideas about gender."²² In this respect, for Eliade, Devi in particular and Indian women, in general, continue to be a source of amusement as well as confusion on a simultaneous basis: "Was she stupid, like all young girls, are genuinely simple, a primitive, as I imagine *all Indian girls* to be."²³ Eliade's strategic use of imperial license deprives Indian women of their diversity by categorizing them as a homogenous class of primitives: "The 'third-world woman' can thus be seen as yet another object of Western knowledge, simultaneously knowable and unknowing."²⁴

Research Methodology

This rereading of the novel does not seek to challenge the merits of Eliade as an artist. It rather focuses on exploring how his imperial ideology is manifested in the novel. Besides, it will also be indicated how what Mohanty calls a "third world woman"²⁵ is invented and compared to the 'first world woman' in the novel under discussion. The present rereading of the novel is a concerted effort to explore the partial exemplification of colonised women against white women. This revisionary reading emphasizes the need for rediscovering and revisiting the novel as an instance of imperialist literature that reinforces what Spivak calls a narrative of "worlding,"²⁶ in which the natives not only learn of their land as belonging to their colonial masters but also start seeing themselves as they are recorded and represented by their masters. Also, a narrative which supports the European colonising social mission by projecting the stereotypical image of third-world women as backwards and primitive. In what follows, I will show how Eliade as an imperialist

¹⁹ Rajan and Park, 'Postcolonial Feminism/Postcolonialism and Feminism', p. 53.

²⁰ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2010), p. 6.

²¹ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1998), p. 89.

²² Margaret Walter, *Feminism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 117-118.

²³ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 29.

²⁴ Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, p. 86.

²⁵ Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse', p. 337.

²⁶ Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogue*. p. 243.

resides in Western colonialist ideology in representing the colonised men in general and women in particular.

Imperialism and the construction of third world woman in *Bengal Nights*

According to Boehmer, colonialism should not be confused with imperialism which refers to the economic and military power that a state assumes over another territory and it is expressed either in pageantry or in symbolic language. Imperialism is explicitly associated with ideological mechanisms which provide continuous support to colonialism, “the consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands, often by force.”²⁷ Eliade ambivalently thought of Devi, “a Bengali maiden who had developed too quickly” as “ugly” as her eyes failing to meet the European standard of beauty were “too large and too black” with “thick and curling lips and the powerful chest.”²⁸ Devi is being exoticised and racialised to justify the perpetuation of imperialist ideologies governing the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands. According to Hema Chari, to enforce their imperialist and Orientalist agendas, the British depict the colonised peoples and their cultures as morally, socially, psychologically, and intellectually of substandard nature.²⁹

Lucien Metz, introduced as a European anthropologist in the novel, was writing a book on India. To compile a chapter on a “real Indian Woman”, he visited Devi’s house to document his observations about her in the book truthfully. With an anthropological zeal and enthusiasm, Metz continued “closely”³⁰ scrutinising Devi’s body, jewellery and dress code. While reflecting on Metz’s minute observation, Eliade remarked: “It was a *strange examination*. Lucien weighed up the jewels in his hand, giving *exclamations of wonder*, asked questions and took down the answers in shorthand. During all this, Maitreyi stood, her face ashen, trembling from head to foot as though stricken with *pure terror*.”³¹ The lines unambiguously show how imperialism exploits the knowledge-power nexus to construct its ethnic and cultural others as the objects of colonialist historiography, rendering them as subalterns who are denied the right to self-expression and self-articulation. Spivak maintains that “to consider the Third World as distant cultures, exploited but with rich intact literary heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted, and circularized in English translation fosters the emergence of “the Third World” as a signifier that allows us to forget that “worlding,” even as it expands the empire of the literary discipline.”³² This is how in the context of the tyrannizing regime of colonialism, a woman can never record an effective resistance against

²⁷ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

²⁸ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 1.

²⁹ Hema Chari, ‘Scripting Woman into Discourse of Nostalgia: Gender and the Nation State’, *Narratives of Nostalgia: Gender and Nationalism*, eds Suzanne Kehde and Jean Pickering (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), p. 124.

³⁰ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 5.

³¹ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 7.

³² Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Text and A Critique of Imperialism’, p. 243.

her suppressed and silent past because “the subaltern cannot speak.”³³ Notably, Eliade admitted that he and Devi “hardly ever spoke together”³⁴ so to unburden himself from the white man’s burden, Eliade continued to speak on behalf of the muted Indian women: “By implication, the silencing of the subaltern woman extends to the whole of the colonial world, and to the silencing and muting of all natives, male or female.”³⁵ Spivak argues that as Indian women belong to the politically oppressed and marginalised sections of colonial society and as their history is in deep shadows, they find themselves enchained as subalterns: “Both as an object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant.”³⁶

Eliade further asserts that Devi is “inhuman, miraculous and hardly real...I could not fathom the mystery that lay hidden in this creature.”³⁷ The words “mystery”, “miraculous”, “hidden” and “inhuman” are enough to prove Devi a riddle or problem to be solved. The metaphors Eliade uses for Devi’s characterisation signal that India is an empty or blank spot in the history of the world and therefore needs colonial historians who can bring it within the fold of history. According to David Cave, the sole reason Eliade visited India was “to study first-hand the Oriental culture with which he was well familiar through books. He also came to make his cultural creations, and, in his way through authentic experiences, to seek the absolute.”³⁸ Therefore, Eliade is proud of his position “as white civilizer”³⁹ in India and it is chiefly due to this civilising task that he regards his duty as railways engineer better than writing a dozen of books about India, which hitherto he has known through “sensational newspaper article or books.”⁴⁰ Boehmer has stressed the fact that in an attempt to chart the unknown lands, colonial travellers imported codes and classifications from Europe and matched them “to peoples, cultures, and topographies that were entirely un-European. And having once done the work of interpretation, the imported symbols, even if entirely arbitrary, often stuck.”⁴¹ Eliade accepts that it is only in the Indian women that he finds “a maternal passion as selfless, as noble and pure.”⁴² But these qualities fail to bar him from passing prejudicial judgments against them as he can’t believe that Devi’s “womanly experience”⁴³ can discern the intricate ideas with precision. Spivak categorically determines that “no perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self.”⁴⁴

³³ Spivak, ‘Can Subaltern Speak?’, p. 109.

³⁴ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 28.

³⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 175.

³⁶ Spivak, ‘Can Subaltern Speak?’, p. 28.

³⁷ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 7.

³⁸ David Cave, *Mircea Eliade's Vision of New Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 9.

³⁹ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 15.

⁴¹ Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, pp. 17-18.

⁴² Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 55.

⁴³ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 57.

⁴⁴ Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Text and A Critique of Imperialism’, p. 253.

White women consider themselves superior and Indian women inferior. Eliade's girlfriend, Clara assumes that Devi is as "dirty" as "negroes" as she lacks white women's beauty standards: "Charged with guarding cultural norms, European women were instrumental in promoting white solidarity."⁴⁵ It is this cultural imperialism that preoccupies Eliade's thinking throughout the novel as he declares that Devi "was more vivacious, more human" and that she was a "vain Bengali, odd, contemptuous of whites and yet drawn to them against her will."⁴⁶ Hence, one of the most cataclysmic binary classifications propagated by imperialism is the creation of the concept of race and consequently "the reduction of complex physical and cultural differences within and between colonized societies to the simple opposition of black/brown/yellow/white is a strategy to establish a binarism of white/non-white, which asserts a relation of dominance."⁴⁷ Importantly, although all women are "banal" yet Devi is more "banal"⁴⁸ because unlike white women who according to the novelist, enjoy personal "freedoms"⁴⁹ in making decisions about their individual lives, she is a slave to the brutal societal customs and patriarchy. Devi's preference for spiritual love over physical love is what compels Eliade to deem her thinking as "primitive" and a consequence of a "superstitious conscience."⁵⁰ Kishwar has proclaimed that "Westerners assume that they have the right to define a self-image and choose their terminology to describe themselves. But the same right is not granted to us, the hitherto colonised."⁵¹ Devi is shown as "incredibly sensual" and this is the "miracle" that sets an "Indian woman" in opposition to a Western woman.⁵² It can be observed that Eliade's imperialist discursive field reproduces an unquestioned ideological self of Devi:

The language of racism-the dark side of imperialism understood as social mission-combines with the hysteria of masculism into the idiom of (the withdrawal of) sexual reproduction rather than subject-constitution.⁵³

Likewise, Devi's insistence on following the Indian customs of marriage, makes Eliade disillusioned as he states "rhythm, karma, ancestors ... How many powers would have to be consulted and invoked if we were to be certain of happiness!"⁵⁴ Mohanty upholds that representing third-world women as family-bound and illiterate is the trademark of colonial discourse:

Third world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read "not progressive"), family-oriented (read "traditional"), legal minors (read "they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights"), illiterate (read "ignorant"), domestic (read

⁴⁵ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁷ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 61.

⁴⁹ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 66.

⁵⁰ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 97.

⁵¹ Madhu Kishwar, 'Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist', *Manushi*, vol. 61, (1990), p. 4.

⁵² Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 60.

⁵³ Spivak, 'Three Women's Text and A Critique of Imperialism', p. 255.

⁵⁴ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 105.

“backward”) and sometimes revolutionary (read “their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they-must-fight!”).⁵⁵

For Kamani the real damage that Eliade's novel does to Devi is her depiction “as being trashed by her family and community and forced into an unwanted marriage” but the fact is that his novel “follows an expected structure as endorsed by Western literary formula.”⁵⁶ Similarly, Devi's mother asserted that a marriage based on passion “could lead only to unhappiness for both husband and wife and that no lasting happiness could result from a passion that is not tempered by tradition - in other words, by the family.”⁵⁷ But Eliade declares that despite his “sincere allegiance to India”, he would never accept such absurd and “insurmountable obstacles” to the institution of marriage.⁵⁸ This is how Eliade continues utilizing colonial ideology to shape his world and image in colonial India. Boehmer maintains that “in this paradoxically confined world of the Empire, any conflict which emerged would always in the first place have to do with the colonizer, with his attempt to shape his world in his image.”⁵⁹ Eliade's discourse on third-world women assumes that they lead “an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized.”⁶⁰ According to Boehmer, the “native or subaltern women were, as it is called, doubly or triply marginalized. That is to say, they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also race, social class, and, in some cases, religion, caste, sexuality, and regional status.”⁶¹

Furthermore, Eliade terms his relationship with Devi as that of a “civilized man and barbarian.”⁶² Entitling himself as a “civilized man”, Eliade underscores his gender as well as superior race: “Gender and sexuality are necessarily imbricated in colonialism and its legacies and cannot be neglected by postcolonial critics.”⁶³ “Child”, “primitive” and “barbarian” are some of the terms frequently bestowed on Devi within the novel. Lata Mani has stated that “to a large extent the British rulers justified their colonial rule over India to themselves and their colonized subjects because it was their mission to civilize and enlighten the natives, even with regards to the woman's question.”⁶⁴ For Acheraiou, one of the aims of infantilizing the colonised races (as Eliade infantilizes Devi by calling her a ‘child’) is to restrain them in a perpetual state of political immaturity, rusticity and alienation.⁶⁵ To develop my point further, I refer to Boehmer who argues that any young middle-class European man in India (as was the case with Eliade), in search of a

⁵⁵ Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, p. 352.

⁵⁶ Ginu Kamani, ‘A Terrible Hurt: The Untold Story behind Publishing Maitreyi Devi’, *University of Chicago Press Reviews* (1996). At: <https://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/143651.html>.

⁵⁷ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 123.

⁵⁸ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 124.

⁵⁹ Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, p. 63.

⁶⁰ Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, p. 337.

⁶¹ Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, p. 216.

⁶² Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 32.

⁶³ Chambers and Watkins, ‘Postcolonial Feminism’, p. 297.

⁶⁴ Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 352-353.

⁶⁵ Amar Acheraiou, *Rethinking Postcolonialism: Colonialist Discourse in Modern Literatures and Legacy of Classical Writers* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 71.

colonial business was assured that “whatever choice he made would land him in the ranks of an exclusively male hierarchy. Wherever he might find himself in the Empire, he could rely on the maleness of imperial institutions: the British army, the Indian Civil Service, and other colonial administrations.”⁶⁶

Eliade writes that Devi “was finally forced to acknowledge my victory. Her joy at having been defeated was entirely sensual and mixed with bitterness: she was happy because I had *mastered* her” (emphasis added).⁶⁷ It is Devi’s eroticism that baffles the novelist: “She was beautiful with a seductive beauty bordering on voluptuousness”⁶⁸ and her provocative appearance necessitates her as an untrustworthy person: “The idea that I had given my entire being to a child who would fall into the arms of any passer-by enraged me.”⁶⁹ Even though, white women have superficial manners and unpredictable behaviour, Eliade has no “suspicions” about their integrity, because, unlike Devi, they have a certain self-esteem and a “sense of moderation” to be safeguarded from immature conducts. So, white women will not give in themselves to any stranger but Devi being deprived of such a sense of moderation, can fall into anybody’s arms: “I knew well the superficiality and capriciousness of *our* women, but I also knew that a certain self-respect and sense of moderation would have stopped them giving themselves to the merest stranger.” Notably, the use of the personal plural pronoun, “our” underscores Eliade’s partial depiction of a coloured woman and a white woman, invoking racial discrimination. According to Stoler, racism is not just a byproduct of colonial encounters but “fundamental to an otherwise illegitimate access to property and power” in situations as diverse as India and Africa and therefore, “increasing knowledge, contact, and familiarity lead not to a diminution of racial discrimination but to its intensification and more rigid boundaries.”⁷⁰ Boehmer has also maintained that “imperial centrality and certainty” have been enabling colonisers to propagate “the imagery of the racial divide and the dangers of cross-cultural contact.”⁷¹ Eliade’s (1995) novel invokes the same vein of unquestioned imperial certainty and centrality in dealing with the question of third-world women in direct contrast to white women. Devi is so “primitive and irrational”⁷² that nothing in the colonial reservoir can enlighten her with a sense of modesty and purity:

Maitreyi was still an *enigma* to me. I could not predict her actions. It seemed to me that, primitive and irrational as she was, she could have *given herself to someone* without even suspecting the seriousness of her actions and without assuming responsibility for them. My jealousy had been transformed into hatred and I forgot... Maitreyi’s innocence and her almost *supernatural purity*: all I could see was *fantastic treachery*.⁷³ (emphasis added)

⁶⁶ Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, p. 72.

⁶⁷ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 63.

⁶⁸ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 112.

⁶⁹ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 120.

⁷⁰ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule*, p. 24.

⁷¹ Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, p. 63.

⁷² Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 120.

⁷³ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 120.

The ongoing lines underline how Eliade's travelling tale is inherently flawed and self-contradictory as the positives such as "innocence" and "supernatural purity" and negatives such as "fantastic treachery" have been anxiously yoked together to declassify Devi's unfathomable personality. For Boehmer the partial representation of the colonised has been the hallmark of colonial travellers' tales:

Colonialist narratives participated in and reflected this imperial self-absorption, perhaps more prominently so than did other colonial writings, such as travellers' tales. In this way, therefore, as well as stimulating imperial fantasy, British colonialist fiction helped sanction and supervise—if anxiously, even paranoically—the demarcations of imperial power.⁷⁴

The same self-absorption-based colonial gaze is anxiously and paranoically articulated in the novel as Devi's "innocence" and "supernatural purity" are described as treacherously fantastic to render Eliade's imperial speculations regarding the distinctions of colonial powers as ethically necessary: "Sexual desires transgressed racial boundaries; class boundaries incited prurient desires. Undeclared affections and professed disaffections were distorted by category boundaries as they crossed, and redrew those lines."⁷⁵ Eliade sees Devi as an "unfathomable barbarian" and "a pantheist" who profusely exhibits "feminine inflexion."⁷⁶ Representing Devi as "a tangled growth of superstitions"⁷⁷ accentuates how Eliade's colonialist narrative hierarchizes women based on their ethnic and geographic affiliations to consolidate the self-fashioned othering of a third world woman against a white woman. Hence, barbarian, primitive and treacherous are the titles that are awarded to Indian women within the hegemonic imperialist narrative. Spivak, therefore, emphasizes the need for revisiting the literature produced with axiomatics of imperialism:

Attempts to construct the "Third World Woman" as a signifier remind us that the hegemonic definition of literature is itself caught within the history of imperialism. A full literary reinscription cannot easily flourish in the imperialist fracture or discontinuity, covered over by ... an alien ideology established as only Truth, and a set of human sciences busy establishing the "native" as self-consolidating Other.⁷⁸

Eliade's imperial narrative establishes coloured or native Indian women as self-consolidating Others who cannot have any talent at par with white women. The standard of sanity or rationality is Europe and its peripheries, particularly the subaltern as a female has no space for self-expression or self-articulation in the novelist's anthropological and rationalist eyes seeking to integrate his observations on Indian women: "Both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of

⁷⁴ Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, p. 63.

⁷⁵ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule*, p. 11.

⁷⁶ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 42.

⁷⁷ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 105.

⁷⁸ Spivak, 'Three Women's Text and A Critique of Imperialism', p. 254.

colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.”⁷⁹

By calling Devi, a “child” and “seductive” Eliade is suggesting that like her, India too needs the careful hands of the colonisers to be protected from immature behaviours and conduct. For Acheraïou, the child is a privileged colonial trope to describe the immaturity, underdeveloped and evil-like nature of the colonised races:

It combined with the metaphor of primitiveness which together served to justify Europe’s mission to nurture the colonised into civilised, responsible adults. This duty entailed the colonial project’s self-proclaimed ideals consisted of both enlightening the natives and helping their undeveloped countries to advance materially and technologically.⁸⁰

So, nurturing Devi and through her India as a ‘responsible adult’ is what characterizes Eliade’s civilizing mission as it is he who informs us about Devi’s primitive thoughts, untoward feelings and psychological agonies. But like colonial India, Devi’s “problem” remains such a riddle that he could not decipher it: “I was under the *illusion* that I loved her... I realized yet again what it was in her that attracted me: the absurdity, the unpredictability of her whole nature, her virginity – the virginity of a *savage* – and *her power of seduction*. I was perfectly conscious of my state: I was *bewitched*, not in love.”⁸¹ Such a partial account of Devi is yet another proof of how Eliade’s ambivalent colonizing gaze results in Othering the self of a coloured woman: “Imperial ideology and rule were no doubt ambivalent and protean, but colonial society as a whole was markedly racist and essentially based on repression, exclusion and fear of the natives.”⁸² Racism becomes evident when Devi is depicted as “the brute of a Negress” who will never understand Eliade’s “behaviour.”⁸³ On metaphorical lines, “behaviour” may signpost to imperial ideology’s self-proclaimed ideals meant for nurturing the colonised to responsible and mature adults. Throughout the novel, imperial ideology continues to underpin the unchallenged centrality of colonial ideas and speculations about the colonised races under the guise of colonial discourse defined and explicated as “a system of statements that can be made about colonies and colonial peoples, about colonizing powers and the relationship between these two. It is the system of knowledge and beliefs about the world within which acts of colonization take place.”⁸⁴

Correspondingly, Nandy states that colonialism “was congruent with the existing Western sexual stereotypes and the philosophy of life which they represented. It produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity.” Given that, Uday Shankar (Uday Shankar Chowdhury), a renowned Indian dancer and choreographer in the 1920s and 1930s created a fusion

⁷⁹ Spivak, ‘Can Subaltern Speak?’, p. 287.

⁸⁰ Acheraïou, *Rethinking Postcolonialism*, p. 70.

⁸¹ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 73.

⁸² Acheraïou, *Rethinking Postcolonialism*, p. 65.

⁸³ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 173.

⁸⁴ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 37.

style of dance by adapting European theatrical techniques to Indian classical dance. Devi's parents invited Udaj to their daughter's birthday ceremony and his sketch as drawn in the novel is worth considering as it strengthens Nandy's reading of colonialism as necessarily being compatible with the existing Western sexual stereotypes regarding masculinity and femininity. When Udaj entered the house, Eliade was taken aback because of his feminine and seductive looks: "I sensed in him *a magical power of seduction* which could have conquered the entire female population of the city, let alone a girl such as Maitreyi – already in love and easily swayed... his gestures, his expressions, had a softness that was entirely *feminine* – without being in any way freakish."⁸⁵ Eliade continues enunciating his imperial ideology while elucidating Indians and their customs by establishing a chain of self-sustained colonial discourse which allows him to perceive femininity in whatever he comes across in India, be it landscape, Devi, the heroine of the novel, or the dancer, Udaj Shankar: "Gender roles, of femininity and masculinity, of both the colonizer/ruling race and the colonized subject race, were central to colonial discourse....colonial discourse constructed a binary of the ultra-masculine white man and the effeminate native man."⁸⁶ If femininity is ascribed to Indians, masculinity is reserved for Europeans, be they men or women. Gandhi writes that "colonial masculinity defined itself concerning the alleged effeminacy of Indian men" and "India is colonisable because it lacks real men."⁸⁷

The colonists vindicated that the Indian men did not have adequate manliness to rule their land. The effeminacy of the Indian men was a well-thought-out cause for colonisation as the colonisers proposed that the feminineness of the Indian men incapacitated them from governing themselves. Eliade's representation of Indians as being remarkably feminine is enough to underscore that the novel is a pro-colonial document that effeminates native men while reiterating a colonial ideology that Eliade brought to India to enlighten it with awareness and civilisation: "The 'Orient' came to be understood as, among other things, irrational, backward, sexualised and feminised, as opposed to the rational, developed, civilised and masculine West."⁸⁸ To establish the veracity of his imperial speculations, Eliade ascribed a letter to Devi which is crucial in uncovering the masculinity and femininity debate from yet another nuanced perspective. Devi acting as the mouthpiece of Eliade, writes: "I came as a woman because you had made me a woman. You come to me now like a god made of gold and precious stones and I prostrate myself before you in worship because you are much more than my love, you are my sun, my life!"⁸⁹ The ongoing lines from Devi's letter indicate that it was mainly Eliade's socializing and colonizing mission that made her a proper woman.

But Eliade disapproves of Devi's fancied communication and terms it an "escape into mythology" or a "realm of a dream" as it romanticized and transmuted his image from that of a man into a deity: "Maitreyi's mythologizing converted me into an image, an idea, and I no longer

⁸⁵ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 126.

⁸⁶ Pramod K. Nayar, *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), p. 59.

⁸⁷ Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, pp. 99-100.

⁸⁸ Lisa Lampert-Weissig, *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 12.

⁸⁹ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 160.

recognized myself in her ‘sun’ and her ‘flowers’, as I would have wished to remain in her memory: a man of flesh and blood, with his flaws and his passion.”⁹⁰ As Devi’s realm of reverie condensed Eliade to an image, an idea, a mystery and a fantasy, it deprived him of his actual masculine and rational self: “Only in so far as “Woman/Women” and “the East” are defined as Others, or as peripheral, that (Western) Man/Humanism can represent him/itself as the center.”⁹¹ Although Eliade dislikes his fantasised image, using colonial fantasy, he has been structuring and restructuring Devi as a mysterious, enigmatic and primitive character waiting to be recovered, illustrated, simplified and interpreted for European readers. Hence, the standards of colonial discourse undergo a constant vision and revision but the authority for revisiting them rests in the hands of the colonisers and not vice versa. Postcolonial feminists’ perspectives are useful reminder to Westerners of how little we know about the reality of these women’s lives and the way they may be complicated by deep-rooted local beliefs, by practices arising out of class differences, caste, religion, ethnic origins; and also, by the legacy of colonialism.

Representing White Women and Colored Women in *Bengal Nights*

In the same way, Eliade’s novel maintains a marked difference between the portrayal of European women and Indian women. European women have been represented as moderate, educated and rational beings; therefore, they regard their Indian counterparts as lagging behind them. Gertie, an Anglo-Indian girl mockingly asks Eliade, “Do you know what Indian women wash with? Cow dung. I swear it – every time they commit a sin they go to the Ganges and wash with cow dung.”⁹² The remarks manifested with colonial convictions amused other white women as “they all screamed with laughter.”⁹³ Stoler while commenting on the role of European women in the colonies has stressed the fact that they “were not only the bearers of racist beliefs, but hard-line operatives who put them into practice, it was they who destroyed the blurred divisions between colonizer and colonized.”⁹⁴ Hence, one of the reasons for Gertie’s being so critical of Indian women was that she didn’t like the affectional bond between Devi and Eliade. Nandy (1983) has convincingly argued that “white women in India were generally more racist [than their men] because they unconsciously saw themselves as the sexual competitors of Indian men, with whom their men had established an unconscious homo-eroticized bonding” (9-10). Notably, Eliade never denounced his girlfriend Gertie’s discriminatory and unjustified remarks against Indian women because unlike Indian “negroes”, she is a cultured white English woman, who deserves esteem and dignity more than:

No description of European colonial communities fails to note the obsession with white prestige as a basic feature of colonial thinking. Its protection looms as the primary cause

⁹⁰ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 160.

⁹¹ Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, p. 353.

⁹² Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 145.

⁹³ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 145.

⁹⁴ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule*, p. 57.

of a long list of otherwise inexplicable postures, prejudices, fears, and violence...white prestige was a gloss for different intensities of racist practice, gender-specific and culturally coded.⁹⁵

Clara, another European woman, when offended by Eliade, asks him to “go and be comforted by his dirty Bengal women!” and also tells him that he does not have any right to insult her because she is “a Christian”⁹⁶ Clara’s racist beliefs against her ethnically othered women, get translated when she homogenises them as “dirty Bengal women.”⁹⁷ For, as long as she is Christian, she is civilised and has the license to speak on behalf of Othered women who are not enlightened with such ideals: “As custodians of a distinct cultural and moral community, white women had their honour to protect, an issue on which European men could stand united and agree.”⁹⁸ Like Clara, Eliade believed that the questions related to ‘truth’ and ‘the right way of life’ can only be asked within the framework of Christianity, lest one should wander “in a labyrinth of questions and preoccupations which may have a certain charm and even a certain value” but which cannot make “spiritual lives fruitful.”⁹⁹ It can be deduced that the European Clara’s remarks support Eliade’s colonial reformatory visions based on defining and codifying the first-and third-world women’s disparate connections. According to Mohanty (1984), the colonisation process concerning the colonised women is “a predominantly discursive one” as it focuses on “a certain mode of appropriation and codification of “scholarship” and “knowledge” about women in the third world.”¹⁰⁰ Eliade’s and other European women’s colonialist discourse helped them in codifying third-world women under an unduly homogenous class of primitivism:

The hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the West produces a corresponding set of universal images of the “third world woman,” images like the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife, etc. These images exist in universal, ahistorical splendor, setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third world connections.¹⁰¹

On that score, white women have been consistently portrayed as caring, sympathizers and harbingers of civilizing missions in India and it was they who, on Eliade’s arrival in Calcutta, celebrated his “liberation from the clutches of idolaters.”¹⁰² The word, “idolaters” is yet another instance of how white women like Clara and Gertie homogenise Indian women as idolaters, invoking a universal image of third-world women as devotees and submissive: “Insecure and jealous of the sexual liaisons of European men with native women, bound to their provincial

⁹⁵ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule*, p. 54.

⁹⁶ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 146.

⁹⁷ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 146.

⁹⁸ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule*, p. 34.

⁹⁹ Sriparna Basu, *Overlapping Terrains: Orientalism, Indian Nationalism and the Erotics of Cross-Cultural Contact* (PhD Dissertation: University of Illinois, 1999), p. 126.

¹⁰⁰ Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, p. 333.

¹⁰¹ Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, p. 352.

¹⁰² Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 155.

visions and cultural norms, European women, it was and is argued, constructed the major cleavages on which colonial stratification would rest.”¹⁰³ In consequence, in the novel, weeping, crying, terror-stricken, family-bound, dirty and mysterious are the widespread parameters utilised to describe Indian women. For example, Chabu, Devi’s sister is portrayed as attempting to commit suicide. Likewise, a poverty-stricken old woman is sketched as selling bread on the roadside and yet another woman, Lilu, Manto’s wife is pictured as living with her parents because her husband is in debt and cannot afford her expenditures. In short, distress, poverty and lack of agency are the essential characteristics that are uniformly visible among Indian women. Stoler has aptly remarked that in the colonial context, “class distinctions, gender prescriptions, cultural knowledge, and racial membership were simultaneously invoked and strategically filled with different meanings for varied projects.”¹⁰⁴

Also, unlike European women, it is an unidentified “terror” or more specifically, “the glances of terror and stupefaction” that are the hallmark of Indian women’s character and it, therefore, can be adduced that Eliade assumes the role of a psychologist to recommend some curative steps to them. For that reason, Indian women are rarely seen as expressing their distresses, it is Eliade who painstakingly talks about them, peeps into their hearts and reads their minds to award them an identity, albeit, in distorted manners: “The categories of colonizer and colonized were secured through notions of racial difference constructed in gender terms.”¹⁰⁵ The phrases such as “the reddened lips” and “warm shyness” employed to exemplify Indian women’s unvarying appearance, do solidify that Eliade’s novel is an embodiment of imperialism which is not simply “a deliberate and active ideology, but a combination of conscious ideological programs and unconscious ‘rhizomic’ structures of unprogrammed connections and engagements.”¹⁰⁶ According to Mohanty, the application of the notion of women as “a homogeneous category to women in the third world colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks.”¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, it is the “embarrassment” that Eliade faces while encountering an Indian Woman. Whereas, Western women like Norinne, Gertie and Clara are shown a source of “affection” as their beauty and moral qualities “deeply affected” the novelist: “European women were to safeguard prestige and morality and insulate their men from the cultural and sexual contamination of contact with the colonized.”¹⁰⁸ On that account, to foreground the efficacy of postcolonial feminist theory in investigating the imperialist originations of third-world women as Others, one needs to examine how cultural differences have been distorted and repressed within such constructs to signpost the West as civilised and progressive at the expense of the Others:

¹⁰³ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁴ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁵ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁶ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, pp. 216-217.

¹⁰⁷ Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, p. 351.

¹⁰⁸ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power Race and Intimate in Colonial Rule*, p. 71.

The Third World can enter the resistance program of an alliance politics directed against a 'unified repression' only when it is confined to the third-world groups that are directly accessible to the First World. This benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other is the founding characteristic of much third-worldism.¹⁰⁹

Jenny Isaac is yet another European woman who being portrayed as a foil to Devi, plays a central role in the novel. A foil is "a character whose qualities emphasise another's (usually the protagonist's) by providing a sharp contrast, I argue that Eliade places Jenny in direct contrast to Devi to highlight and differentiate certain qualities of the protagonist. Jenny came to India to explore the absolute truth through spiritual meditation and unlike Devi, she is committed to the cause of her life. Eliade appreciated her seriousness of mind and applauded her quest "to find the Absolute", she renounced everything and underwent "infinite suffering" for the sake of personal "freedom."¹¹⁰ Unlike Indian women who are sketched as unvaryingly tradition and family-bound characters, Jenny is shown as an independent woman who is competent enough to regulate her life affairs with precision. Such a positive description of her daring expedition to India underscores that third-world women shuttling between tradition and modernization, need to model their lives on Western ideals to significantly improve their status as civilised beings:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization.¹¹¹

Significantly, for Eliade Jenny's thinking reflects "incoherent arguments" and "confused ideas",¹¹² but nowhere in the novel, she is branded as primitive, irrational, enigmatic or barbarian, the titles utilised to identically describe third-world women as crazy and unfathomable creatures. Rather, Jenny turns out to be a saviour for Eliade, as it was, she who brought him back to the Western way of life: "She also enabled me to appreciate certain things at their true worth, particularly that *European world* which I had left and to which I would have, sooner or later, to return. Above all she allowed me to gauge my own life and values."¹¹³ If Devi trapped him with her seductive looks and eventually detached him from his ideal European world, Jenny enabled him to appreciate things at their true worth:

Indeed, I loved Maitreyi so fanatically, her memory eclipsed any other presence in my mind so completely, that my life, obsessively dedicated to the past, lost all dignity in my

¹⁰⁹ Spivak, 'Can Subaltern Speak?', p. 289.

¹¹⁰ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, pp. 164-166.

¹¹¹ Spivak, 'Can Subaltern Speak?', p. 306.

¹¹² Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 167.

¹¹³ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 167.

eyes, as though it had become irredeemably decayed... I wanted to feel free again, to confirm once and for all my freedom.¹¹⁴

The primitive Devi's spellbound has "irredeemably decayed" and impurified Eliade's European ideals: "In general, where women figured at all in the world beyond the seas it was as seductive distraction or baleful presence, unmanning and polluting for those who fell under her spell."¹¹⁵ Mohanty while stressing the need for reexamining the Western hegemonic discourse that renders the third world women as its ideological composite Other, has proclaimed that:

The relationship between "Woman" – a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.) – and "women" – real, material subjects of their collective histories – is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. This connection between women as historical subjects and the re-presentation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity, or a relation of correspondence or simple implication.¹¹⁶

Another contrastive point in the characterization of these two characters is that Jenny is open-minded and tells Eliade that she gave herself to her German boyfriend before leaving for India and instead of fulfilling her parents' wish for her marriage, she preferred to go after the aim of her life. On the other hand, Devi has been described as having an enchained domestic life while adhering to her parents' orders and societal traditions. This takes us to Mohanty's critique of Western narratives which invoke the worlding of the world as a monolithic and composite category for analysis while dealing with the question of women belonging to disparate contexts:

Universal images of "the third world woman" (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the "third world difference" to "sexual difference" are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives.¹¹⁷

I, therefore, argue that Jenny functions as a foil to Devi's character and in doing so, Eliade was able to compare and contrast Indian and European cultural practices and their role in the formation of a woman's identity. Jenny epitomizes Western society and Devi the Indian society. Nonetheless, Jenny's way of life gets the approval stamp from the novelist, not Devi's.

Remarkably, Devi's haunting memory disturbs Eliade's mind; to get rid of her, he turns to Jenny. The subsequent lines from the novel convey to us Eliade's freed spirits as he holds Jenny's feminine body in his arms: "As I held the blonde, robust body of the Finnish Jewess in my arms, I thought only of Maitreyi. It was Maitreyi I sought in every one of my kisses; yet I also wanted to

¹¹⁴ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 169.

¹¹⁵ Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, p. 73.

¹¹⁶ Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse', p. 334.

¹¹⁷ Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse', p. 353.

rid myself of her memory, to annihilate it.”¹¹⁸ He not only wanted to forget Devi but also yearned to “annihilate” her from his memory. Minh-ha while talking about the whites’ desire to crush their non-white counterparts, maintains that “the will to annihilate the Other through a false incorporation can be detected in every language sign that tends, by its ever-widening scope of encompassment, to be taken for granted.”¹¹⁹ Jenny’s blissful company saved him from Maitreyi’s captivating and fascinating guises: “I was saved. I had been delivered from a sentence of death. I wanted to sing, to run. I do not know what caused the miracle. Something had descended upon me and had filled me.”¹²⁰ We see Jenny miraculously setting him free from the vicious clutches of Maitreyi. I argue that Jenny and Maitreyi have been given distinct images and representations, signifying third-world women’s continuous Othering: “To simply denounce Third World women’s oppression with notions and terms made to reflect or fit into Euro-American women’s criteria of equality is to abide by ethnographic ideology.”¹²¹ European women’s depiction as modern, enlightened, sagacious, individualist, unconventional and civilized against their third-world counterparts, underscores the novelist’s imperialist ideology in studying women from disparate cultures on a partial basis. Minh-ha argues that West’s idealized expeditions of modern enlightenment projects, often result in the endarkenment of its others:

By attempting to exclude one (darkness) for the sake of the other (light), the modernist project of building universal knowledge has indulged itself in such self-gratifying oppositions as civilization/primitivism, progress/backwardness, evolution/stagnation.¹²²

As Jenny’s parents’ “sole preoccupation” was to give her into wedlock, she left them to pursue her life ideals. What Eliade suggests is that European women are much more conscious of exercising their free will and the women belonging to the third world prefer not to challenge the orthodox familial restrictions and customs. Eliade fails to acknowledge the social, cultural, religious and ethnic differences among the women in question: Europe truly became Europe as we know it today only after it foregrounded the experiences of colonialism ... it also then ensured that these became parts of the self-definitions of all defeated civilizations. Lorde has rightfully maintained that the survival for women of colour does not reside in having academic skills, it rather lies in learning how to flourish in a common cause-based struggle: “It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the masters tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”¹²³ To prove the veracity of his imperial speculations about Maitreyi’s integrity, Eliade superadded a supplementary section to the story so that he could expose her hysteria and madness to the readers. Accordingly, Maitreyi disgraced her familys honour by secretly giving

¹¹⁸ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 170.

¹¹⁹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 66.

¹²⁰ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 171.

¹²¹ Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, p. 106.

¹²² Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, p. 40.

¹²³ Audre Lorde, *Zami, Sister Outsider, Undersong*. (Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993). p. 112.

herself to a fruit seller and because of her illicit relationship with the fruit seller, no one would be ready to take her into wedlock. Suffering from hysteria, Maitreyi shouts at her parents: “Why do you not give me to the dogs? Why do you not throw me on the street?”¹²⁴ In other words, Maitreyi has met the same fortune in Eliade’s novel that Bertha Mason met approximately a century earlier in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Just like Bertha Mason, who represents “the woman from the colonies,”¹²⁵ Eliade’s Maitreyi also becomes mad and hysteric. If Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* portrays Bertha Mason as burning down the house and dying after throwing herself off the roof, Eliade’s Maitreyi becomes vengeful against her parents echoing Bertha Mason’s tragic death in colonial settings. In the eyes of Spivak, Bertha’s function in *Jane Eyre* is to render uncertain the borderline between human and animal as she reads this text “as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer.”¹²⁶

I also argue that drawn from the axiomatics of imperialism in *Bengal Nights*, Maitreyi reduces the human/animal cutting-edge as reasonably uncertain as she miserably fails to conform to the European vision of humanness. Because, the distinctive attributes such as brutes, primitives and treacherous are open-handedly awarded to third-world women in the novel. Although Eliade persistently claims that he is writing the novel as a confession by transcribing events from the journal he documented during his stay in India. Yet, in his *Autobiography*, he acknowledges that he made dramatic modifications in terms of writing the conclusion of the story: “I drastically modified the conclusion as if I wished to separate myself definitively from Maitreyi. And of course, I bathed that faraway world in a pale golden light, radiated from memories and melancholia.”¹²⁷ I, therefore, maintain that these radical modifications helped Eliade render the frontier between human and monster and sanity and insanity as reasonably indeterminate while describing Maitreyi in an imperialist framework. This overtone emphatically underscores that colonialist narratives’ hierarchizing women based on their ethnic affiliations, foregrounds what Spivak calls “a narrative of worlding.” Thus, it is the unchallenged ideology of imperialist axiomatics that conditions Jenny’s move from home in the quest for knowledge and freedom and condemns Maitreyi’s homebound or dependent life. In this way, Eliade’s admission reinforces his active ideology of imperialist discursive field and also undermines his claim of impartially reporting the lived experiences with authenticity and veracity. Eliade admits that renouncing Western culture to seek a home in the exotic spiritual universe of India was the result of a premature renunciation of all his creative potential as he insists that “I could not have been creative except by remaining in my world—which in the first place was the world of Romanian language and culture.”¹²⁸ I contend that his return to the European world to exhaust his creative potentialities reinstates my claim that Jenny’s image as an independent Western woman is constructed at the

¹²⁴ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 176.

¹²⁵ Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Text and A Critique of Imperialism’, p. 251.

¹²⁶ Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Text and A Critique of Imperialism’, pp. 247-251.

¹²⁷ Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, p. 240.

¹²⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Autobiography: Journey East, Journey West, Volume 1, 1907-1937*, trans. Mac Linscott Ricketts (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 199-200.

expense of Devi's Othering because the latter has no purpose in life whereas the former awakened him to the European way of life that he has forgotten while living in India: "Rules of inclusion and exclusion operate on the assumption of the superiority of the colonizer's culture, history, language, art, political structures, social conventions, and the assertion of the need for the colonized to be 'raised up' through colonial contact."¹²⁹

Conclusion

To conclude, Eliade's novel exposes the imperialist construction of the 'Third-World Woman' as a homogeneous and inferior being, contrasted with the free, idealized and intellect 'Western Women'. Through the characters of Devi and Jenny, Eliade maintains colonialist narratives that praise Western/European women as the embodiment of modernity and enlightenment while dehumanizing and objectifying the Indian women. Postcolonial feminist critiques, especially those of Spivak and Mohanty, highlight how such literature reinforces racial, cultural, and gendered hierarchies, silencing the voices and agency of colonized women. This study underscores the necessity of dismantling these imperialist discourses to reclaim the diverse identities and experiences of women marginalized by both patriarchy and colonialism. Eliade's work, therefore, exemplifies the intersection of gender and colonial power, sustaining stereotypes that serve Western dominance.

¹²⁹ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 37.