

THE SATI, THE BRIDE, AND THE WIDOW: SACRIFICIAL WOMAN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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MY TITLE BRINGS TOGETHER two cultures — Indian and British — and three phases of womanhood — the bride, the widow, and — through suttee — the dead widow. Suttee, or sati, is the obsolete Hindu practice in which a widow burns herself upon her husband's funeral pyre.¹ In this essay I wish to explore how sati was used as a metaphor in British novels and periodicals in the nineteenth century — used both as a metaphor for the British widow's mourning rituals and for the plight of the British bride in an unhappy marriage. I shall argue that sati forms a nexus connecting the seemingly disparate situations of the bride and widow, and that it also in this metaphorical sense forms a nexus or point of comparison between British and Indian culture.

After much Parliamentary debate, sati was outlawed in India in 1829. By this time the practice had become a favorite subject for indignant letter-writers to the government and to the press, who described the practice as “primitive” and “barbarous.” A barrage of petitions, official accounts, and statistics was published in Parliamentary papers, which made their way along with gruesome eye-witness accounts into both the British and Anglo-Indian press. But the abolition of sati did not put an end to the newspaper accounts and to popular interest in the practice. A survey of nineteenth-century British periodicals shows articles on the plight of the Hindu widow appearing well into the 1880s. Indeed sati seems to have held a morbid fascination for the Victorians. Their preoccupation with what they themselves referred to as the “Woman Question” took the form of novels, poems, paintings, and articles on the various manifestations of the victimized British female whether she be seamstress, governess, prostitute, factory worker, or so-called “redundant woman” (see Greg). I would argue that the interest in sati was partly an extension of this preoccupation with the woman as victim; the sati (and this term refers both to the act of immolation itself and to the woman who performs it — “sati” means “good woman” in Hindi) is the ultimate sacrifice, the absolute image of the woman as sacrifice.²

I shall begin by exploring some of the language in articles on sati in nineteenth-century periodicals and then look at the way sati was used as a metaphor in turn for the British widow and the British bride. Finally I will show how George Meredith's novel *The Egoist*,

published in 1879, uses sati to bring together the bride and widow as images of sacrifice, of immolation.

The approach to the issue of sati in the periodicals is varied but generally follows two trends. The first tends to present the sati (that is, the woman herself) as innocent victim of evil Brahmins and family. The second trend in describing the custom presents the widow as a willing participant, and often as admirable and courageous in the faithfulness to her dead husband. In a number of accounts which correspond to the first of these trends it is notable that the victim is often young, thus adding to the melodrama and certainly to the disturbing nature of these eye-witness accounts.³ In the following early account from the *London Magazine* in 1827 — two years before the practice was made illegal — a fourteen-year-old's Brahmin husband dies, and her relatives build a pyre for her to burn herself upon:

She soon leaped from the flame, and was seized, taken up by the hands and feet, and again thrown upon it, much burnt; she again sprung from the pile, and running to a well hard by, laid herself down in the water course, weeping bitterly. . . . At length, on her uncle swearing by the Ganges, that if she would seat herself on the cloth (which he had provided) he would carry her home, she did so, was bound up in it, carried to the pile now fiercely burning, and again thrown into the flames. ("Hindoo Widows" 544)

Eventually a Moslem standing by cut her through the head with his sword to save her from further suffering. This account of sati clearly presents the widow as a victim of force, of murder, and the magistrate's report shows that the relatives were imprisoned. Aside from the very disturbing actual events of this account it is also true that the elements of good melodrama are here — the young victim duped by an evil uncle, the horror of the burning, and the Moslem man's final act of mercy.

In the British periodicals, accounts from the early part of the century tend to be more extreme in their presentation of the sati as victim. This of course is partly due to the fact that the campaign and pressure for the abolition of sati was growing fierce in the British and Anglo-Indian press at this time.⁴ In recent years there has been increasing attention given to the use of sati as a justification for the British presence, and especially to the British downplaying or ignoring of the Indian response which desired that the practice be abolished, particularly embodied in the efforts of Rammohun Roy.⁵ These Indian responses and efforts have been discussed by Arvind Sharma, Ashis Nandy, Lata Mani, and Ajit Ray. The emphasis of my argument falls elsewhere: this essay brings together British attitudes to British brides and widows and to Indian widows. I shall address the contradictory British reactions to sati both in the press and in literature, reactions of condemnation and of admiration for the practice. How can these two opposing attitudes be accounted for from a British point of view? and why was there a shift in accounts of sati in the mid-to latter part of the century, these later accounts presenting the Indian widow as admirably faithful?

The first trend, of condemnation, is represented in the eye-witness account of 1827 above; the second is evident in the two following accounts of sati. In these accounts I would like to note that the women are presented as young and attractive, and the eye-witness accounts of sati are often disturbingly voyeuristic. While almost all descriptions begin by calling the ritual "barbarous" and the product of a primitive culture, there is clearly an

interest in the spectacle of sati, behind, or as well as, the agenda of social reform. Often there is a detailed account of the woman's attractions and physical movements. For example, this eye-witness account from *Bentley's Miscellany* of 1842 exhibits a rather jolly anticipation of the spectacle as a form of horrific entertainment — reminiscent perhaps of the crowds drawn to the spectacle of the hanging of a woman in England at this time. The author of "Hours in Hindostan" from this periodical writes:

After making an excellent breakfast, and taking half a dozen whiffs at the hookahs our host had provided for us, we sallied forth. We were just in time. . . . It was evident that they were mad from excitement, or drunk from opium. Their gestures were frantic, their cries terrific. At length the hackary arrived beside the ring; and the young girl sprang out of it. She was not above fourteen, and certainly one of the sweetest-looking natives I ever recollect seeing. . . . She was, I verily believe, more than half intoxicated, and seemed to pant for the coming moment, anxious to prove her unshaken constancy to her late husband, as well as desirous of showing her courage. (Addison 187)

In the following article of 1843 the woman is also a willing participant, but she is older and presented as more calm and dignified. She is described as about thirty years of age with "an aquiline nose, well-defined, and full, large black eyes, the peculiar beauty of her caste; her profusion of coal-black hair hung loose and dishevelled, dragging and wet, and reaching near to the ground; her complexion as is not unusual with females of good Brahmin families, seemed exceedingly fair" (Kennedy 243). She enters the pile with composure and grace, waiting for it to be set alight:

[H]aving arranged the flax about her (she) bent forward to take leave of them with smiles, and the most perfect composure; which done, she most composedly laid herself down full-length by the side of the corpse . . . with her right hand over it. In this position she was stretched along, as if comfortably in bed, well cushioned in on every side, and well pillowed with loose flax. (253)

In this account the sting and horror is partially removed by a domestication of the ritual. She climbs into the pyre, as the writer says, as if she were "clambering into a native carriage for a journey. . . . She looked like one at her own door, just starting for a day of travel" (252). In the pyre she seems positively cosy and content, as if in bed with her husband.

I have argued that these two types of description — the first type representing the woman as either duped or drugged, the second representing her as willing, calm, and dignified — correspond to two attitudes to the ritual itself in the periodicals. Both attitudes to the immolation proclaim it a barbarous practice which is in itself tragic, but the first sees the woman as a true victim — that if she were not drugged or brain-washed she would not go through with it. The second type of account sees the woman capable of making a sober and individual decision to perform the rite — in fact as eager to go through with this ultimate act of faithfulness to the dead husband.

These two perspectives on sati have their parallels in attitudes to the widow in England, to her faithfulness or lack thereof to the memory of her dead husband. If the popularity of the "Woman Question" extended itself outside Britain itself to her Indian

colony and to an interest in the Hindu woman, then an admiration for the Hindu widow's faithfulness may also reflect attitudes to women, and specifically to the English widow as well. For example, the epigraph to one eye-witness account of a sati reads:

Of woman's strength, and woman's nobleness,
And all that she can bear, and all her gentleness. (Kennedy 241)

All women — both Hindu and English — are included here. Woman is placed in the position of victim with the strength and nobility to bear her burden, her sacrifice. The faithful woman — whether she be a sati or not — is sentimentalized. In many accounts of sati, this admiration for the Hindu widow, especially when she is young and sexually attractive, has parallels with a sentimentalization of the faithful young widow in English culture.

Turning now to England I shall focus upon two paintings which portray opposing images of the widow. Richard Redgrave's *Preparing to Throw Off Her Weeds* (Fig. 8) was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1846. A young widow has been in deep mourning then in modified or half mourning for about two years. She is now in the final phase and is returning to brighter (lilac-grey) colors. Evidence of the traditional *vanitas* theme lies in the maid holding up the mirror to her mistress. A key to the narrative of this painting is the hat box in a corner which contains a bridal bonnet and orange blossom (see Casteras and Parkinson 124). This detail reveals that the widow is not simply throwing off her weeds but is preparing for another marriage. The original painting showed a young officer, her fiancé, entering from the door on the left — and in the background above the dressing-room screen we can just discern the portrait of the former husband keeping an eye on the proceedings.

This painting aroused considerable journalistic comment when exhibited, the critics almost unanimously dismissing the subject matter as "vulgar." The art journal *The Critic* thought that the painting "went too far for good taste in the lady who, it should be remembered, is yet attired in mourning" ("Royal Academy" 622-23). *The Art-Union* describes the subject:

the engagement of the widow is indelicately announced by the hasty entrance of the officer, which is assuredly ill-timed and ill-judged; and the treatment otherwise is toned with vulgarity. ("Royal Academy" 177)

The painting now hangs in the Sheepshanks Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and it is thought that the great Victorian collector John Sheepshanks asked Redgrave to paint out the picture of the soldier/fiancé before he added the painting to his collection (Casteras and Parkinson 124). The reactions to Redgrave's painting reveal much of the anxiety surrounding the position of the young widow. She is sexually attractive and knowledgeable, and this widow is clearly not going to be faithful to her husband's ashes. The vulgarity lies in the abrupt juxtaposition of mourning and wedding rituals, the black crape and orange blossom, and also the fact that the scene takes place in the widow's private chamber, her dressing room, and that that room contains the presence of two men who should never meet, the image of the dead husband and the (now-erased) image of the husband-to-be. The incongruity both of the mourning and wedding and of these two men



Figure 8. Richard Redgrave, *Preparing to Throw off Her Weeds*, 1846. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

jars on the Victorian sensibility, that same sensibility which can hold an admiration for the faithfulness and devotion of the sati in Indian culture.

The second painting I wish to look at is a watercolor, *A Young Widow*, painted in 1877 by a minor artist, E. K. Johnson (Fig. 9). The young widow has taken her wedding dress



Figure 9. E. K. Johnson, *A Young Widow*, 1877. Courtesy of the Print Room, the Victoria and Albert Museum.

out of the chest and is wistfully remembering her wedding day. Art critic Susan Casteras has remarked that although Queen Victoria went into severe mourning for ten years after Albert's death in 1861 and wore some degree of mourning for the rest of her life, "Victorian painters seemed far more fascinated by the widow who was young, attractive and vulnerable, a potent formula to excite pathos" (Casteras 35). Clearly the image of Johnson's widow follows this formula. Again, like Redgrave's painting, Johnson's water-color exhibits a jarring juxtaposition of mourning and wedding with dramatic effect — but the tone here is not one of vanitas or social satire. In a way which corresponds to the tone used to describe young and attractive satis in the English periodicals of the time, the effect here is one of pathos and sentimentality, responding to the tragedy of the faithful young widow and her wasted love and sexuality. The rich sheen of her wedding dress and its voluminous folds and furbelows contrast with her almost priest-like or monastic mourning wear; the inference seems to be that she will now devote herself to a life of celibacy and devotion to the memory of her dead husband.

With the rather uncanny effect of a trick photograph, this painting, if looked at from another perspective, could be interpreted very differently; it leaves itself open to the possibility that the young widow is wistfully regarding the wedding dress thinking not of that past, lost wedding day, but of her chances of wearing it again. Her musing face then has the expression of anticipation and calculation rather than tender nostalgia. Obviously this is not the original intention of the painting, but perhaps this second interpretation does create a certain tension or drama in the image, the tension that juxtaposing a young beautiful widow with a wedding dress may almost inevitably demand thoughts of her marriage. This tension — even anxiety — lies under the surface of the intention of the painting. It is related to the anxiety which obliged Redgrave to paint out the image of the soldier/fiancé walking into the widow's dressing room, and the anxiety which brought the dismissal of that painting as vulgar. Both paintings show the woman as survivor, and both show the woman portrayed in some conjunction with both mourning and wedding clothes. In that space of difference, of disparity between the black and white, between the mourning and wedding clothes, stands the shadowy figure of a man — either the recently-deceased husband or the perhaps still unknown future husband, who like the painted-out fiancé in the Redgrave painting waits in the wings to meet the shadowy portrait of the dead husband in his lady's private chamber. Part of the anxiety surrounding these two paintings and other paintings of young widows is the fear of the blunt physical replacement of one man by another, and the fear that the dead man somehow will be erased and forgotten in the mind of the supposedly faithful widow after his death.

Mourning and Sati

I TURN NOW to the use of sati as a metaphor for women's mourning rituals in the West, beginning with yet another image of a widow, in this instance in a photograph, *Mrs. Howes in Deep Mourning*, from about 1860–70 (Fig. 10). From the dog-collar or monastic severity of E. K. Johnson's sentimental widow's clothing we move to mourning wear which truly keeps the widow hidden away at the same time as it makes her a rather striking presence. Her individual identity is erased as she is hidden behind her veil, but her social identity, or at least her social position as grieving widow in a certain stage of mourning, is very clear. Such clothing might understandably inspire comparisons with purdah, but the most com-



Figure 10. *Mrs. Howes in Deep Mourning*, c. 1860–70. Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.

mon way of describing Western women's mourning costume in literature and the periodicals was as a form of sati, as in this passage from *The Woman's World* in 1889:

In all cases, the nearer the relative the more cumbrous becomes the dress of the female mourner; but the widow's dress positively amounts to a mild form of *Suttee*, and would seem to hint that the idea underlying various heathen rites as to the conduct of women is not absolutely extinct among us. . . . It is, in actual fact, a survival of the outward expression of the inferiority of women; for . . . the inferior always expresses grief for the superior. (Harberton 419–20)

The article from which this quotation comes makes a connection between the inferior position of the servant and all women; in the houses of the upper classes the servants were required to wear mourning when a member of the family they served died. Servants were expected to mourn because of their position of inferiority, and the article analogously places women in a similar position of inferiority; even when a distant relative of a woman's husband died, it was she who was expected to bear the burden of the mourning, restricting her social appearances and wearing mourning attire. There was not a reciprocal relationship when a member of the wife's family died; men were not inhibited from appearing socially, and their mourning clothes could hardly be said to be a burden because they were for the most part the same as their everyday clothes.

The metaphor of sati is used in the above passage from *The Woman's World* to make a connection between English and Hindu widows. The Hindu widow traditionally was expected to live through and for her husband; with the death of her husband, her social importance ceased and her presence was considered a burden and bad luck. She was venerated only if her very existence was ended with her husband upon the funeral pyre; in that case she was often raised to the status of a divine being. The English widow must immolate herself sexually and socially by wearing the outward signs of her grief and faithfulness to her husband's memory and either by not appearing in public or, if she does, by wearing clothes which keep her hidden and make her public presence an icon of walking grief. Even though sati had been abolished sixty years before this comment was made in *The Woman's World*, it is still a potent metaphor and the Hindu widow's plight can still be used to stand for the inferior position of women. Indeed the Hindu woman's situation was still part of the popular "Woman Question" so often addressed in the press and in literature and art. A Hindu woman was quoted in the periodical *The Nineteenth Century* in 1886, speaking of the ill-treatment and low status of the Hindu widow: "The only difference for us since *sati* was abolished is, that we then died quickly if cruelly, but now we die all our lives in lingering pain" (Das 372). The quotation implies that sati has not been abolished but has simply changed form; it was a single act of immolation, and now it is a living, lifelong sati. The quotation from *The Woman's World* makes the connection between the inferiority of the Hindu widow and the English widow who must express her inferiority in the living sati of widow's weeds. This recognition of the Hindu and English woman who are together in a male society as "other" and are placed in a position of inferiority also entails a recognition of the "otherness" of Hindu culture, which is considered alien, mysterious, and inferior to English society. Therefore on the one level of sex, the Hindu and the English woman are connected by being "other" in a male society, but on the level of culture the Hindu woman is seen in the quotation as alien and

inferior. The strength of the criticism of course relies upon comparing practices in England with those in what is considered an inferior culture. It relies partly on a connection with Hindu society (British women are placed in an inferior position through mourning, like the Hindu women — both are made to suffer for the death of the husband) and partly on a rejection of that society (it is not right that British women should be able to be compared with Hindu women because the latter are from an inferior and barbarous culture).

After having read actual eye-witness accounts of *satis* such as the few discussed earlier in this essay, it may seem extreme — indeed, rather disturbing — to equate the English woman's mourning costume with an act of immolation by fire. Other uses of *sati* in nineteenth-century British novels are light-hearted in their references to the practice. A transition from the accounts of real *satis* and the suffering of the Hindu women to these at times glib and witty metaphors does leave open questions about a lack of awareness and sensitivity behind the popular metaphor. Perhaps the inundation of accounts in the popular press and the Parliamentary debates, particularly in the earlier part of the century, made the practice seem less powerful in its familiarity and gave it such currency in the language that it lost some of its horror in the popular imagination, therefore enabling it to be used in this metaphorical manner. These questions lie outside the scope of this essay, but in now drawing attention to and outlining the way these metaphors work in examples from nineteenth-century novels I hope to give some insight into the manner in which some British writers were thinking about their own culture's social practices as rituals — as rituals which could be compared revealingly with those “barbaric” rituals of a distant, alien culture.

In an early chapter of *Barchester Towers* (1857), Trollope discusses young Eleanor Bold's loss of her husband. Since Trollope does not express unmitigated admiration for the deceased there may be an undercurrent of irony in the typical sentimentalization of the young widow's near-worship of the memory of her dead husband, but pathos still rules: “Poor Eleanor Bold! How well does that widow's cap become her and the solemn gravity with which she devotes herself to her new duties! Poor Eleanor!” (14; ch. 2). This sentimentality is undermined somewhat a few chapters later when the beautiful Italian signora, Madeline, plotting to marry Eleanor to her brother Bertie, sees Eleanor's widow's cap as a thing so unsightly that simply to have to wear it is an act of *sati*.

“The death of twenty husbands should not make me undergo such a penance. It is as much a relic of paganism as the sacrifice of a Hindoo woman at the burning of her husband's body. If not so bloody, it is quite as barbarous, and quite as useless.”

[Her brother responds:]

“I fancy that if I were to die, and then walk, I should think that my widow looked better in one of those caps than any other kind of head-dress.”

“Yes” [responds the signora], “and you'd fancy also that she could do nothing better than shut herself up and cry for you, or else burn herself.” (141; ch. 15)

In Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864) the comic and canny widow Mrs. Greenow uses her mourning clothes to great effect as she looks out for a new husband:

The widow was almost gorgeous in her weeds. I believe that she had not sinned in her dress against any of those canons which the semi-ecclesiastical authorities on widowhood have laid down as to the outward garments fitted for gentlemen's relicts. The materials were those which are devoted to the deepest conjugal grief. As regarded every item of the written law her suttee worship was carried out to the letter. (412; ch. 40)

He goes on to describe the proverbially hideous widow's cap, the crape, and the trailing weepers which generally look so unattractive, but then explains:

But there was that genius about Mrs. Greenow, that she had turned every seeming disadvantage to some special profit, and had so dressed herself that though she had obeyed the law to the letter, she had thrown the spirit of it to the winds. Her cap sat jauntily on her head, and showed just as much of her rich brown hair as to give the appearance of youth which she desired. . . . Her weepers were bright with newness, and she would waft them aside from her shoulder with an air which turned even them into auxiliaries. Her kerchief was fastened close round her neck and close over her bosom; but Jeanette well knew what she was doing as she fastened it, — and so did Jeanette's mistress. (413; ch. 40)

Mrs. Greenow uses the sentimentalization of the widow as a way to gain sympathy and regard from the men around her. She manages to make crape and the widow's veil sexually enticing, and her position as widow becomes not one of inferiority and social immolation, but one of empowerment. Through comedy which avoids becoming harsh or satirical, Trollope knocks at the hypocrisy of the social laws surrounding mourning for women. Mrs. Greenow fully understands the drama and pathos of a beautiful woman who can still look beautiful in mourning weeds, and her response — to make these clothes work for her rather than flouting convention and thereby losing social standing — is applauded by Trollope as a healthy and clever response to the hypocrisy of the conventions.

In *Jane Eyre* (1847) we have the reference to sati coming not in a moment of mourning but in the moment of courtship and engagement, as Rochester and Jane share a doomed happiness together before the revelation of his marriage. Together after dinner Rochester plays the piano and sings to Jane:

My Love has placed her little hand
With noble faith in mine,
And vowed that wedlock's sacred band
Our natures shall entwine.

My Love has sworn, with sealing kiss.
With me to live — to die;
I have at last my nameless bliss:
As I love — loved am I!

He rose and came towards me, and I saw his face all kindled, and his full falcon-eye flashing, and tenderness and passion in every lineament. I quailed momentarily — then I rallied. Soft scene, daring demonstration, I would not have; and I stood in peril of both: a weapon of defense must be prepared — I whetted my tongue: as he reached me, I asked with asperity, "whom he was going to marry now?"

"That was a strange question to be put by his darling Jane."

“Indeed! I considered it a very natural and necessary one: he had talked of his future wife dying with him. What did he mean by such a pagan idea? *I* had no intention of dying with him — he might depend on that.”

“Oh, all he longed, all he prayed for, was that I might live with him! Death was not for such as I.”

“Indeed it was: I had as good a right to die when my time came as he had: but I should bide that time, and not be hurried away in a suttee.” (275; bk. 2, ch. 9)

In teasing Rochester in order to keep him at a distance, Jane takes him to task over the literal meaning of the words to his sentimental song. Her close reading of the song is comic, but it also reveals Brontë’s questioning of these popular sentiments which imply that “wedlock’s sacred band” so entwines the lovers’ natures that they must not only live but die together.

The words of the song are simply clichés, maudlin nothings, which we would hardly notice in a song in a Victorian novel until Jane draws attention, albeit jokingly, to the primitive or barbarous implications the words have in English society by comparing the vows of the song to a demand for sati. Perhaps Jane’s rejection of sati adumbrates in some way the fact that Rochester already has a wife who plays with fire. His mad wife, Bertha Mason, almost fulfills the vow expressed in Rochester’s sentimental song — “My love has sworn with me to live — to die” — but with the wrong wife. In a strange inversion of the sati ritual, Bertha first attempts to burn Rochester in his bed, then attempts to burn Jane’s (now empty) bed, and finally burns Thornfield — almost immolating herself with her husband.

Sati and Weddings

MY LAST QUOTATION FROM *Jane Eyre*, although it deals with Jane’s rejection of a sentimental image of the faithful wife who is faithful even in death, is nevertheless associated not with widowhood but with the courtship and engagement period of her relationship with Rochester. As such, it serves to make the transition from my discussion of sati as a metaphor for English mourning costume and the rituals surrounding the widow to an exploration of sati as a metaphor associated with the bride. The Hindu and the English widow have at least the death of a husband in common; how then is sati used as a metaphor for the English bride? I introduce this seemingly obscure connection with a passage from an equally obscure novel from 1833 — T. E. Hook’s *Love and Pride*:

Nothing is read by a protestant, especially a protestant woman, with greater interest than the details connected with the ceremony of taking the veil. Pratt, an author of great merit in his day, but now nearly forgotten, was one of the earliest if not the first, who, mingling fact with fiction, gave an account of the proceedings at one of these European suttees. . . . If such an immolation then be really matter of stirring interest, something better than indifference may be claimed for poor Harriet Franklin; true it is, that she was not destined to crop her hair, and casting away her jewels with disdain, assume a veil; nor was she to be buried in a cell, with an iron-bedstead and one chair by way of furniture; nor was she absolutely to renounce the society of all her early friends and acquaintance; but it is equally true that she was about to be married to an elderly gentleman in despite of her feelings and inclinations, and give up one who, as it appeared, was more to *her* than a crowd of worldly associates. (174–75; vol. 1, ch. 7)

This passage brings together three types of female sacrifice which apparently hold a fascination for the English Protestant woman (and, as we have seen from the periodicals and literature, for the English male as well). The first is the “European sati,” or specifically the Roman Catholic ritual of a girl entering the convent as a nun. During this ceremony she traditionally dresses as a bride, becoming a “Bride of Christ.” This “sacrifice” is then compared with the arranged marriage of a young English girl to an “elderly gentleman.” Therefore the sacrifice of the English girl’s affection for a younger man and the giving of her virginity — her taking of the bridal veil against her inclinations — is likened to her taking the veil of the nun, which, going back one more metaphorical step, is likened to a sati. The metaphor of the sati for the bride moves disturbingly close to English shores, though the likeness of an arranged or unwilling marriage in England to a sati is distanced culturally from a Hindu sati by the “European suttee” of the Catholic ritual. The English practice is still one remove metaphorically from the “barbarous” practices of her Indian colony.

In George Meredith’s novel *Beauchamp’s Career* (1876), the marriage of Renée, Beauchamp’s French love, is likened to a sati. Renée’s father has arranged her marriage to a much older man whom she does not love. This is portrayed as common practice in France — but not in England: Renée’s brother tells Beauchamp, “In India they sacrifice the widows, in France the virgins” (52; ch. 7).

These quotations from Hook and Meredith both use Europe though in different ways as a metaphorical buffer, inhibiting a too-direct correlation between Hindu sati and an English marriage. In Meredith’s *The Egoist* this distancing or buffer is relinquished, and we see the metaphor of sati standing for both English bride and widow, bringing these two phases of womanhood into a disturbing juxtaposition.

The main action of *The Egoist* stems from the desperate attempts by the heroine Clara Middleton to extricate herself from her engagement to the seemingly irresistible Sir Willoughby Patterne. During a pre-wedding holiday, sequestered on Willoughby’s country estate, Clara realizes to her horror that she has developed an intense dislike of her betrothed and must avoid marrying him. Willoughby however will not let her out of the engagement; he has made her swear a solemn vow that “they were plighted; they were one eternally; they could not be parted” (80; ch. 5). But Willoughby then requires another oath of Clara, an oath which repels her and which is very similar to the oath in Rochester’s song in *Jane Eyre* — the “My love has sworn with me to live — to die.” Willoughby begs Clara to swear that if he dies she will never remarry, that she will, as he pleads, “be inviolate? mine above? — mine before all men, though I am gone — true to my dust? . . . True to my name!” (85; ch. 6). The woman who marries Willoughby must become him, not simply in the figurative manner of the Biblical “one flesh” in marriage, but literally one personality, one spirit, together in life and at least spiritually in death. Willoughby staves off his fear of death and of losing his name and identity by trying to ensure that his wife always keeps his name and keeps him alive in memory. She must become a living elegy to his ego.

The phrase “Till death us do part” of the Christian marriage service implies that the wedded can actually be parted at death even if they do expect eternal reunion in an after-life. Willoughby, as an English gentleman who covets his reputation in the county as a model of civilization and enlightened thought, can hardly ask Clara to burn on his funeral pyre. Yet as the references to sati gain momentum in the novel, Clara seems to

register that spiritually at least he requires that sacrifice of her. This sacrifice is the immolation of her social self, of all her interests which lie outside Willoughby. Her fiancé desires that Clara reject the world in life as well, that she live with him on his estate bound up in his identity, caring nothing for the outside world. But Clara rejects Willoughby's philosophy of love and marriage, and her thoughts play upon the theme of sati when she tries to find the words to formulate her independence to herself: "She would not burn the world for him; she would not, though a purer poetry is little imaginable, reduce herself to ashes, or incense, or essence in honour of him" (81; ch. 6). Marriage becomes associated with mourning and death here when Clara begins to see her marriage with Willoughby as a kind of sati or possible immolation of herself. Because Willoughby demands that both her legal and spiritual identity become one with him, Clara sees that this unhappy marriage could be for her a living sati, a period of mourning for her dead self which has become one flesh and forced into one personality with a man from whom she feels alien and repelled.

The Egoist is riddled with references to sati, and it is not only Clara Middleton whose pre-marital consciousness plays with thoughts of immolation; Willoughby too finds his unconscious anxieties centering on this metaphor. He also is worried about the sacrifices he will have to make of himself if he marries, but he is most disturbed by the thought that if he weds Clara, he will run the risk that Laetitia Dale — his constant admirer since he was a youth — may finally forget him or give up her love for him in despair. He wants Laetitia to devote her life to him and to his memory even though she will never be able to marry him. As Meredith proclaims of Laetitia's disappointment in love: "it is worth while for here and there a woman to be burned, so long as women's general adoration of an ideal young man shall be preserved" (53; ch. 3). Fearful that Laetitia will not stay faithful to the memory of her love for him, that she will not keep her vestal flame burning after he marries, Willoughby muses:

She might have buried it [the secret of the old days between them], after the way of woman, whose bosoms can be tombs, if we and the world allow them to be; absolutely sepulchres, where you lie dead, ghastly. Even if not dead and horrible to think of, you may be lying cold, somewhere in a corner. Even if embalmed, you may not be much visited. And how is the world to know you are embalmed? You are no better than a rotting wretch to the world that does not have peeps of you in the woman's breast, and see lights burning and an occasional exhibition of the services of worship. There are women — tell us not of her of Ephesus! — that have embalmed you, and have quitted the world to keep the tapers alight, and a stranger comes, and they, who have your image before them, will suddenly blow out the vestal flames and treat you as dust to fatten the garden of their bosoms for a fresh flower of love. (67; ch. 4)

Willoughby's confused, disturbed feelings about his sexuality, self, mortality, and chances of being remembered are expressed in Meredith's stream-of-consciousness language. The story of the woman of Ephesus (which Willoughby tries to repress) is told in Petronius's *Satyricon*. She was another widow willing to sacrifice herself to her husband's memory, but her chosen method of self-immolation was to be starvation in her husband's tomb rather than burning. However this widow's span of faithfulness does not last the night in the tomb; she is seduced at her husband's grave by a soldier who is keeping watch nearby over the bodies of some crucified criminals. The body of one of the criminals is stolen by

relatives while the soldier is dallying with the widow, and by the next morning the widow has replaced the stolen body with the body of her dead husband so that her new lover will not be court-martialled for negligence. The blunt physical replacement of one body with another horrifies Willoughby, and his distaste is reminiscent of the accusation of vulgarity in the Richard Redgrave painting of the widow “throwing off her weeds,” discussed earlier. In both this painting and the story of the woman of Ephesus, one man is coming in to sexually replace the man who has very recently “gone out.”

Willoughby’s fear of a death of love in Laetitia prefigures his fear of death and his fear that he will be forgotten and that either an old admirer or his widow will replace him with another man. His anxieties make him call for the utter devotion in life and in the after-life of two women, Laetitia Dale, his boyhood love, and Clara, who is to be his wife. Through the metaphor of sati both these women gain a way to describe what Willoughby is demanding of them, and having the language — being able to name the enemy — is half their battle won. They begin to realize that to be married to Willoughby, not to be widowed by him, is to perform an act of living sati.

Sexual jealousy, a desire to be remembered after death, or the wish to stave off the death of love are “primitive” or fundamental feelings common to most. In *The Egoist* Meredith observes Willoughby’s barbarous responses to these feelings in himself, but it is only because Willoughby attempts to hide these common human instincts, as Meredith writes, “Beneath a mask and in a vein of fineness,” that he becomes ridiculous and truly barbarous.

I have mentioned that the most frequent adjectives used in British journals and in the Parliamentary reports to describe sati are “primitive” and “barbarous.” I would argue that some of the writers I have been discussing who use sati as a metaphor for British mourning or wedding rituals are, however jocosely, pointing a finger back in upon their own culture. They are looking at how some of the most common and celebrated rituals of British society can look surprisingly barbarous and primitive from certain perspectives and particularly from the aspect of women’s role in these rituals. This is not to say that these writers are *equating* sati with British rituals of mourning or marriage, but that they use the colonial metaphor partly to look at their own society’s complacency when describing an alien culture and the hypocrisy surrounding mourning and wedding rituals for women, these being two important rites of passage in the woman’s life.

The eighteenth-century law commentator Sir William Blackstone had written of marriage:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs every thing. (1: 442)

His language both echoes and modifies the language of Christian tradition in that man and woman become “one flesh,” but that flesh is legally seen as that of the husband. With the Divorce Act of 1857 and the long debates in Parliament over the Married Women’s Property Act, which was finally made law in 1882, the woman started to become a separate entity, at least legally, from her husband; she was able to own property in her own name, to enter into a contract, and eventually to become legally separated from her spouse. A

conservative perspective may have seen these changes as effecting the breakdown of traditional Christian marriage; husband and wife were no longer inextricably joined “Till death us do part,” and women were no longer absolutely “one flesh” in the eyes of the law with their husbands. An extreme response to this supposed breakdown of Christian marriage may have been an emphasis on faithfulness in marriage — an emphasis so extreme as to actually “go one better” than the vow of “Till death us do part,” venerating the wife who is loyal to her husband *after* death as well. This emphasis results in the celebration in literature and painting of the young and beautiful widow, faithful to her husband’s ashes, which in turn produces the reaction of the satirical and jokingly dismissive responses to this sentimentalization in the form of the sati metaphor.

I conclude with a paradoxical moment from the periodical *Bentley’s Miscellany* in 1843. Yet another account of sati, it closes by contemplating the tombs of immolated widows:

The heart bleeds to think of the scenes of human suffering and wretchedness they commemorate, — the bloodshed and the wrongs, — all man’s violence and cruelty, and woman’s faithfulness! Let us hope that a new day has dawned on India, and that these wretched sacrifices may be spoken of by future generations as things that were, before British dominion enlightened India, and may the beneficent rule of the young Island Queen of the West be made memorable in her eastern dominions by those blessings of moral, and political, and physical improvement, which, once established, may go on conquering and to conquer, until every dark recess of the Cavern of Error shall have been enlightened, and every stronghold of cruelty and superstition been overthrown! (Kennedy 256)

It is an interesting moment when in this passage we have the hope expressed that the model of Queen Victoria, the enlightened “young Island Queen of the West,” will inspire the Hindus to abandon sati (the practice still occurred illegally at times, after abolition), when we know that eighteen years later Albert’s death will inspire the Queen to an almost obsessively faithful widowhood, which will in turn help to support an industry of mourning clothes — clothes which themselves will be described by English writers as a form of sati. This juxtaposition in the passage of the sati and Queen Victoria (who will be both faithful bride and extremely faithful widow) throws into relief some of the paradoxes and inconsistencies surrounding nineteenth-century British attitudes to the sati, the bride, and the widow.

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NOTES

1. “Suttee” is the anglicization of the Hindi “sati,” and both words may refer to the ritual itself or the woman who performs, or suffers, the ritual. In the course of this essay I shall use the term “sati” rather than “suttee,” as the former is now in common parlance.
2. Mani argues that this presentation of the Indian widow as forced, unwilling victim was part of the British “official discourse” produced around sati. She states that, “Colonial officials systematically ignored such evidence of the widows as subjects with a will of their own . . . The widow thus nowhere appears as a full subject. If she resisted, she was consid-

- ered a victim of male barbarity. If she conceded, she was seen to be a victim of religion” (117).
3. Mani asserts that, “Colonial representations further reinforced such a view of the widow as helpless by ‘infantalsing’ the typical *sati*. The widow is quite often described as a ‘tender child’. Analysis of *sati* by age fails to confirm such a picture, for a majority of *satis* were undertaken by women well past childhood. In 1818, for example, 64% of *satis* were above 40 years of age” (117). While I agree that there is certainly evidence in the accounts of this “infantalsing” (see, for instance, the account in “Hindoo widows” from *London Magazine*, 1827), I also see much evidence for a sexualizing of the *sati*. These two modes of presentation are, of course, not mutually exclusive.
 4. Sharma has divided Western reactions to *sati* into three periods: the first, which dates from as early as the 4th century B.C. all the way to 1757, is marked by “a mix of admiration and criticism” — and not by efforts to interfere with or abolish the rite. The second and third periods, with which I am concerned as they divide the nineteenth century, Sharma dates as 1757–1857, and post-1857. The second period, Sharma asserts, is marked by “reactions of condemnation and prohibition” which culminated in the abolition of *sati* in 1829. The third period features two opposing trends: “On the one hand an approach of broad-based condemnation was developed which used *sati* as a justification for the perpetuation of the British Raj in India. On the other hand, a streak of admiration also reappeared” (13). Sharma is using the year of the Indian “Mutiny” (1857) as a point of transition in Western attitudes to the practice. The “Mutiny” rocked the Raj, and Sharma argues that after 1857 *sati* was used as a convenient justification for the continuation of the British presence in India — they could say that their rule was benign and humane as it would ensure that *sati* remained illegal. Sharma, however, does not supply reasons for the “streak of admiration,” as he puts it, reappearing for the Indian widow in the post-1857 accounts. In the periodicals there are certainly accounts of women described as nobly and willingly immolating themselves before 1857 and, indeed, before 1829. Although I do not see evidence which clearly supports Sharma’s date of 1857 as a transitional point after which some appreciation and admiration for the Hindu widow returned to the British accounts, I would agree that there is more of a tendency for the tone of admiration to appear in the mid- to latter part of the century.
 5. See, for instance, Joshi.

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