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Interpreting *Sati*: The Complex Relationship Between Gender and Power In India

Cheyenne Cierpial

A recurring theme encountered in Hinduism is the significance of context sensitivity. In order to understand the religion, one must thoroughly examine and interpret the context surrounding a topic in Hinduism.¹ Context sensitivity is necessary in understanding the role of gender and power in Indian society, as an exploration of patriarchal values, religious freedoms, and the daily ideologies associated with both intertwine to create a complicated and elaborate relationship. The act of *sati*, or widow burning, is a place of intersection between these values and therefore requires in-depth scholarly consideration to come to a more fully adequate understanding. The controversy surrounding *sati* among religion scholars and feminist theorists reflects the difficulties in understanding the elaborate relationship between power and gender as well as the importance of context sensitivity in the study of women and gender in Hinduism.

India is a society in which women who perform *sati* have historically been considered honorable for their decision to burn themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres. The question arises, however, if the decision is truly the woman's, or rather is a result of the patriarchal Indian society that victimizes women. Western feminist scholars debate the morality of *sati* as violence against women condoned by religion, but critics have raised the issue that universal feminism lacks context sensitivity and is characterized by a lack of inclusion of women of other cultures. As British rule abolished the act as a crime, Hindu women began to further lose their voice in the matter. Regardless of her decision to perform or not to perform *sati*, there are consequences for her actions, creating a double-bind scenario for Hindu widows. The act of widow burning as a double-bind reflects the complex relationship between power and gender in Indian society as well as brings into question the free will and moral agency of the women choosing to immolate themselves. In examining this ritual as an attempt to recognize and prevent gendered violence, some feminists claim *sati* is an unjust violence against women while other feminists claim that culture is a necessary point of consideration in the understanding of *sati*.

¹ A.K Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay," in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 23 (1989): 41-58.

Women in Hinduism: A Brief Overview

In order to examine more fully the act of *sati*, one must understand the way women are viewed in Indian society and Hinduism. One key aspect to understand in relation to *sati* and patriarchal society is that women are considered part of their husbands and therefore wives must give their energies and power to their husbands.² Men must control women and therefore the ideal woman is usually portrayed as a dutiful wife and a fertile mother.³ In other words, women are defined in relation to men. This simple explanation of patriarchy in India speaks to both sides of the argument surrounding *sati*. On one hand, it illustrates the control men have over women in society and the ways in which women do not make decisions for themselves. Conversely, it illustrates how performing *sati* means a woman is a “devoted wife who chose to overcome death by becoming a goddess or *sati-mata*.”⁴

Sati can be literally translated to mean “virtuous woman”; a woman becomes a *sati* through devotion to her husband.⁵ However, the idea of *sat* or goodness that is accumulated through devotion to the husband can be related to his death. The wife is supposed to protect her husband from death through serving him, providing for him, caring for him, performing rituals on his behalf, and being devoted to him. Through these practices and devotion, *sat* is created in the dutiful wife and accumulates so that it can save and preserve the husband’s life.⁶ In Hindu society, a widow can be blamed for the death of her husband. *Sati* acts as a ritual necessary in order to regain and achieve ultimate devotion to her husband. The more metaphorical illustration of *sati* is that a good wife has so much *sat* from her husband’s lifetime that “on his death the accumulated heat of her inner goodness compels her to the pyre,” which portrays the *sati* as an honorable hero by her choice to immolate herself.⁷ For women who do not chose to burn themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands, their lives after their husbands’ deaths can be difficult. Widowhood results in the loss of value and place in society because women are defined by their relationship to men.

Sati and Colonialism

In 1829, the British colonial authorities passed an act prohibiting and abolishing the act of widow burning, condemning it as an inhumane crime against

2 Susan S. Wadley, “Women and the Hindu Tradition,” in *Women in India: Two Perspectives*, ed. Doranne Jacobson and Susan Wadley (Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1995), 115.

3 *Ibid.*, 117.

4 Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 73.

5 Andrea Major, *Sati: A Historical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), XIX.

6 *Ibid.*, XXVII.

7 *Ibid.*, XXIX.

women.⁸ This itself raises many problematic concerns in relation to women and *sati*. The abolition of *sati* was part of the “project of codifying law [that] was intended to facilitate rule, ensure clarity as well as uniformity, and minimize the supposed prejudicial readings of indigenous interpreters of scripture.”⁹ This act did not stem from Western Christian beliefs, but rather the abolition was more rooted in creating a Hindu law based on Hindu scriptures; British colonial powers explored the extent to which *sati* is presented in the scriptures.¹⁰ In the years leading up to 1829, the debate, which did not involve women, continued on whether or not there was religious sanction in this act. The British placed certain restrictions on *sati* based on age, pregnancy, intoxication, and coercion.¹¹ The final decision was made on December 4, 1829, to outlaw *sati* and make it punishable by criminal courts.¹²

In *Sati: A Historical Anthology*, Andrea Major provides several varied Indian opinions on the abolition of *sati*. She provides several pages of dialogue and discussion between an Indian advocate and an Indian opponent, thus illustrating the continued debate and controversy. Major also includes a congratulatory address thanking the government of India from *East India Magazine* after passing the Act to abolish *sati*. The address includes detailed descriptions of the violent crime and the attempts made to stop a burning widow from escaping. It concludes with the following:

In consideration of circumstances so disgraceful in themselves and so incompatible with the principles of British rule, your Lordship in Council fully impressed with the duties required of you by justice and humanity, has deemed it incumbent on you for the honour of the British name to come to the resolution that the lives of your Hindoo female subjects should henceforth be more efficiently protected; that the heinous sin of cruelty to females shall no longer be committed.¹³

This Indian opinion argues in favor of the Act against *sati*, saying it was put in place to protect women from violence and to uphold human rights and maintain justice. However, Major goes on to include a “Petition of the Orthodox Community against the Sati Regulation,” which states that the petition is a response to “certain persons taking it upon themselves to represent the opinions and feelings of the Hindu inhabitants of Calcutta” who “have misrepresented those opinions

8 Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*, 73.

9 Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 16.

10 *Ibid.*, 16-17.

11 *Ibid.*, 18.

12 *Ibid.*, 24.

13 Major, *Sati: A Historical Anthology*, 146.

and feelings.”¹⁴ The petition goes on to claim that the regulation of *sati* “interferes with religion and customs of the Hindus which we most earnestly deprecate and cannot view without the most serious alarm.”¹⁵ These differing opinions of Indian citizens on *sati*, as well as the differing opinions between British missionaries interested in social reform and British pragmatists who viewed colonialism as solely a money-earning enterprise, illustrate how the controversy becomes increasingly complex when the component of colonial power is introduced.

The Case of Roop Kanwar

One specific case of *sati* in 1987 that caused a public outcry in India and stirred the debate and controversy by scholars was the death of Roop Kanwar. Roop Kanwar was eighteen years old and had been married to her husband for eight months when he died. She committed *sati* in front of thousands of people following his death, which was seen as a voluntary act of honor and devotion by the village.¹⁶ However, both politicians and activists took sides, arguing with reports that Roop Kanwar had been drugged with opium and pressured by those around her.¹⁷ Reports of those who witnessed the *sati* varied; some claimed they witnessed supernatural powers of Roop Kanwar with glowing red eyes and internal heat being emitted, while others said that the widow was unsteady and appeared drunk or drugged. Both of these claims have been interpreted as witnessing Roop Kanwar in a kind of spiritual trance.¹⁸

While pilgrims and villagers worshipped her as a new goddess and erected shrines and pictures, small groups protested for the end of celebration of widow death.¹⁹ In response to anti-*sati* groups, pro-*sati* groups emerged that argued for religious freedom to perform ancient traditions and spoke out against anti-*sati* women claiming they were “corrupt, godless, westernized, and having abandoned tradition.”²⁰ After the eruption of violence and controversy surrounding Roop Kanwar’s death, police arrested several men said to be involved in administering her drugs, lighting the funeral pyre, and otherwise involved.²¹

Mary Daly and Universal Feminist Response to Sati Ritual

One can begin to explore the feminist views, using the case of Roop Kan-

14 *Ibid.*, 146.

15 *Ibid.*, 147.

16 Mala Sen, *Death by Fire* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 2.

17 *Ibid.*, 2-3.

18 *Ibid.*, 5.

19 *Ibid.*, 7.

20 *Ibid.*, 8.

21 *Ibid.*, 11.

war as an example, which argue for the protection of women against gendered violence but also raise many problematic generalizations about women across cultures. Mary Daly, a radical Western feminist who is outspoken on the topic of *sati*, argues that the widow is the victim of a patriarchal society imposing violence against widows. Daly's examination of *sati* begins with the discussion of treatment of widows in Hindu society, noting, "their religion forbade remarriage and at the same time taught that the husband's death was the fault of the widow. . . everyone was free to despise and mistreat her for the rest of her life."²² This societal standard can be justified by Hindu texts, such as the *Adi Parva of the Mahabharata*, which states that a woman is to have only one husband during her life and should not have intercourse with another man during or after her husband's lifetime.²³ As previously discussed, the ideals of femininity and the expected roles of women in Indian society cause the widow to lose her place and value in society, especially if the widow has no sons.

Elaborating more on the detailed status of widows in Hindu society, Sakuntala Narasimhan emphasizes that widowhood "came to be seen as the worst calamity that could ever befall a woman; it became the ultimate degradation because it practically invalidated her continued existence."²⁴ Narasimhan goes on to explain some of the limitations and oppression faced by widows following the death of their husbands: widows are permitted one meal a day, should sleep on the ground, and are forbidden from wearing perfume, flowers, dyed clothes, and hair adornments. Men were advised not to eat food prepared by widows, and a widow among one's presence was said to jeopardize one's chances of success.²⁵ This paints quite clearly a picture of the alternative of *sati*: life as a widow.

Commenting on this, Daly continues, "If the general situation of widowhood in India was not a sufficient inducement for the woman of higher caste to throw herself gratefully and ceremoniously into the fire, she was often pushed and poked with long stakes after having been bathed, ritually attired, and drugged out of her mind."²⁶ The stance that women who perform *sati* are not making their own decisions arises on different levels. On one hand, there are ideological arguments that a patriarchal society has been making decisions for Hindu women throughout their lives. If their decisions to marry, who to marry, where to go to school, and what job to take or not to take a job, have primarily been made by their fathers and husbands, is the decision to immolate themselves truly being made by themselves?

22 Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 115.

23 Isvarachandra Vidyasagara, *Marriage of Hindu Widows* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1976), 73.

24 Sakuntala Narasimhan, *Sati* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1998), 57.

25 *Ibid.*, 58-9.

26 Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, 116.

On the other hand, as Daly points out, the decision to perform *sati* may be made for them through the use of pressure or drugs that impair decision-making.

Daly's argument extends far beyond the stance that *sati* is wrong. Delving further, she explores the notion that *sati* and other sado-rituals are "an obsession with purity."²⁷ She views this obsession with purity as a mechanism for silencing, in which the victims are killed through rituals that are centered around purification. For example, the rite of *sati* is not performed during an impure time for a woman, such as during menstruation, and several key aspects of the ritual focus on purification. This purifying aspect speaks to the larger issue of purifying society of the wicked, the widows or traces of female rebelliousness.²⁸ Ultimately, the threat of death in relation to purity is used to keep other women and young girls from experiencing the same fate, disciplining young girls and women to acting in accordance with the patriarchal values of taking proper care and being subservient to men.²⁹ This continues the repetition of the cycle of men dominating and controlling women, silencing them so that their voice and decision is not one that occupies space. If it is not her decision, the *sati* is a violent crime against women.

Julia Leslie and Criticism Towards Daly

Many postcolonial feminists criticise Daly's understanding and presentation of *sati* as a universal wrong as problematic, overly generalized, and lacking context sensitivity. In their critique of Daly, Renuka Sharma and Purushottama Bilimoria argue that the position one should take on the issue of *sati* is not one within the dichotomy of acceptable or wrong, but rather one that exists in the margins and with sensitivity towards the topic.³⁰ They go on to argue that Daly's argument applies a Western feminist view to the social phenomenon and lacks research on the cultural, historical, and spiritual aspects of the rite of *sati*.³¹ In other words, Daly operates on the assumption of universality, that Western feminism is the only lens through which to view *sati*. Sharma and Bilimoria, however, write that once an Indian social context is applied, "the evidence of the complicity of patriarchy at each stage of the act is unredoubtable; however, that does not necessarily mean that patriarchy alone and unmodified is generating this violence in all its

27 Ibid., 131.

28 Ibid., 131.

29 Ibid., 131.

30 Renuka Sharma and Purushottama Bilimoria, "Where Silence Burns: Sati (Suttee) in India, Mary's Daly's Gynocritique, and Resistant Spirituality," in *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Daly*, ed. Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Marilyn Frye (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 324.

31 Ibid., 324.

locations.”³² In fact, contextualization of *sati* through a religious lens, noting the places in which female sacrifice on behalf of men occurs in religious history, may lead to the conclusion that *sati* “yields greater liberative potency” and that the female is the one in control.³³

In an essay analyzing the differences between Daly’s radical universal feminism and Audre Lorde’s culturally inclusive feminism, Amber L. Katherine further identifies problems with Daly’s statements as supported with evidence and quotations by Lorde. Though her critique of Daly is not specifically aimed at understanding *sati*, it does provide valuable insight into this struggle between cultural/context sensitivity and universal white feminism. Katherine quotes Lorde saying, “the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background . . . serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women . . . Assimilation within a solely western European herstory is not acceptable.”³⁴ The point that Katherine and Lorde make is that universal feminism cannot use whiteness as the norm to which all women are compared. One must not use the western European and North American feminism as the only right perspective, excluding and othering different cultures such as that of the Hindu women in India. In order to make progress against oppression, feminists must aim to be inclusive of differences in culture, religion, and lifestyle.

Julia Leslie, a feminist scholar who has focused on South Asian studies and Hindu women, provides a feminist view with a more contextualized interpretation of *sati*. From the very start and in response to Mary Daly’s stance on *sati*, Leslie insists on understanding and judging. She emphasizes the need for true understanding, as well as takes the position that violence of *sati* must be ended. She writes, “While trying to understand the empowering aspects of *sati*, we must never forget the violent and degrading reality. Second, there is a place for outrage.”³⁵

Understanding why *sati* makes sense to so many women and men does not mean condoning it or accepting the necessity for it, or even refusing to judge. What is important to note is the discourse that Leslie uses in analyzing the controversy surrounding *sati*. She does come to a conclusion about *sati* and the need to protect women from gendered violence, but she does not approach it from a universalist perspective. In no way does she glorify *sati*, but instead aims to “juxtapose the two views” associated with *sati*— woman as victor and woman as

32 Ibid., 345-6.

33 Ibid., 346.

34 Amber L. Katherine, “‘A Too Early Morning’: Audre Lorde’s ‘An Open Letter to Mary Daly’ and Daly’s Decision Not to Respond in Kind,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Daly*, ed. Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Marilyn Frye (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 276-77.

35 Julia Leslie, *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women* (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1991), 177.

victim. Fundamentally, she is looking for the ways in which women bring power and dignity to an oppressive ideology.³⁶ Through this perspective and approach, Leslie is able to bring into question several aspects that may be left unconsidered when assuming a more universalist standpoint. This allows for the exploration of the relationship between power and gender as well as the moral agency and free will of the widows choosing *sati*.

With Leslie's proclamation that *sati* need not be condoned or glorified, she presents an explanation and understanding of *sati* through a Hindu lens. *Sati* can be used to ensure a place in heaven for the husband through the wife's actions, cleansing any negative karma accumulated for unwifely actions or lacking *sati* in the marriage. Erasure of the ritual results in no ritual of atonement for the widow and therefore no escape of what awaits her in the next life.³⁷ She concludes that one aspect of empowerment of *sati* is that it is a "strategy for dignity in a demeaning world," yet this is where many intersections and deeper issues remain.³⁸ She notes that it is a demeaning world, which is because of the patriarchal values and gender ranking of Hindu society, and that *sati* may serve as redemption of morality and respectability.

If the widow kills herself to make up for the degradation imposed upon her by the patriarchy, what is supposed to be empowering is still tightly bound in the power structure. It reflects the ways in which women's lower status is disguised to be an honorable act. Scholar Sakuntala Narasimhan elaborates on this, stating, "The rite of *sati* seen as part of this wider canvas of women's status in society shows how immolations take their place as an extension of the elaborate grid of pressure brought to bear on women, right from childhood on to turn what is in fact murder, into a mystical act."³⁹ The rite of *sati*, death, is contrasted against a continued life of oppression (unable to remarry, unable to wear good clothes or jewelry, unable to go outdoors, unable to participate in happy occasions) so that either way the patriarchal values and power are being projected onto the woman.⁴⁰ This further illustrates the double bind, in which there are very limited options for action and all of them expose the individual to harsh consequences or deprivation.⁴¹ Regardless of the choice that a *sati* or widow makes, she will undoubtedly be exposed to some form of pain and suffering. This, in itself, is a mechanism for silencing women.

36 Ibid., 177.

37 Ibid., 187.

38 Ibid., 190.

39 Sakuntala Narasimhan, *Sati* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1998), 42.

40 Ibid., 43.

41 Marilyn Frye, "Oppression," in *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 68.

Context Sensitivity and Universal Human Rights

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes the phenomenon of “white men saving brown women from brown men” in which either way the voice of the Hindu woman is not heard.⁴² Either choice that is made by the *sati* is a reflection of patriarchal values of either brown men or white men. To what extent is the *sati* able to voice her opinion? In this way, the *sati* takes on the subaltern subjectivity, or the identity of a marginalized, silenced person who lacks access to power. The abolishment of *sati* by British colonialism also brings into question the context sensitivity required by Hindu theology.

As seen in the case of Roop Kanwar, the abolition of *sati* did not stop all of the widow burning rituals from occurring. The British colonial authorities, and therefore independent Indian government, have encountered difficulties in enforcing the regulation.⁴³ As Daniel J.R. Grey explains this difficulty in “Creating the ‘Problem Hindu’: Sati, Thuggee, and Female Infanticide in India,” stating, “All that could be done . . . was for colonial officials to publicize the ban widely, stress the ‘inhumanity’ of *sati* among the Hindu community, and hand down stern but ‘fair’ punishment towards those who failed to prevent a self-immolation.”⁴⁴ While feminists and scholars continue to debate the topic of *sati* and the oppression and violence against women in Hinduism, one must recognize that there is no inherent, correct conclusion that can be made. As many Western theorists and feminists claim, epistemic violence and misogyny are universal wrongs, regardless of context. Other feminists argue, however, for the need of inclusion of culture and understanding of different religions in women.

What arises out of this controversy with seemingly no right answer is the need for dialogue and consciousness-raising. While no one scholar, religion, or government can declare what is right or wrong for a group of people, education and discussion serve as a necessary starting point. To raise awareness about different religions and cultures as well as possible acts of violence occurring internationally is to begin to protect universal human rights. This raises a much larger issue at the heart of global universal rights discourse: To what extent is a human being entitled to universal rights regardless of their religion, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, and race? And upon answering this, careful consideration need be paid to making sure that universalism is not a way for western practices to be placed as the norma-

42 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,” in *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010) PAGE.

43 Daniel J.R. Grey, “Creating the ‘Problem Hindu’: Sati, Thuggee, and Female Infanticide in India,” *Gender & History* 25, no. 3 (2013): 501.

44 *Ibid.*, 501.

43 Martha Nussbaum, “Women and Cultural Universals,” in *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1999), 46.

tive structure for all. Martha Nussbaum, a theorist on human and women's rights, argues for "The capabilities approach," which insists that "a woman's affiliation with a certain group or culture should not be taken as normative for her unless, on due consideration, with all capabilities at her disposal, she makes that norm on her own."⁴⁵ Though this speaks to the need for universal human rights, it cannot dictate what is right and what is wrong within a culture. If there was a way to know that a woman had all capabilities, knowledge, and choice at her disposal, does that make *sati* acceptable in terms of human rights? Each culture, characteristic, and orientation of individuals must be addressed in order to assume a complete understanding of their rights, even if they are universal.

Context sensitivity, again, comes into play when deciding through which perspective one will see the world. A person can decide to view religion as a disciplinary apparatus that further enforces gender ranking and stratification and perpetuates sexism, misogyny, and oppression. On the other hand, this same person may view religion as one of the most important aspects to life, providing a framework for ethical and moral choices. Regardless, context sensitivity must be considered when interpreting religion and culture in order to assess issues like *sati* in the most appropriate and inclusive way.

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45 Nussbaum, Martha. "Women and Cultural Universals," in *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1999), 46.

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