Title
Circulating Flames: Sati, Bridget Cleary and the Fiery “Native Woman”

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Innumerable sighs hold together the heart of this luckless woman. How many are the unfulfilled longings, the wounds burning with pain that are alight in her heart: has anyone seen any of this? They become prostitutes forced by circumstances, lacking shelter, lacking a space; but they too, first come into this world with the heart of a woman. The woman who is a loving mother, she too belongs to the self-same species! The woman who dies in the burning flames with her husband also belongs to that same species!

Binodini Dasi, *My Story.*

Binodini Dasi, one of the first actresses in the 19th century professional Bengali theatre in Kolkata, was literally a “public” woman. The first female actresses in Bengali theatre were all “public” women, prostitutes frequently with wealthy benefactors who also made a living doing theatre. This dubious status of women in the Bengali theatre and society in general at the time led to Dasi’s impassioned pleas in her autobiographies, *My Story* and *My Life as An Actress,* to be recognized not only as a woman, but as an individual worthy of sympathy, a member of a common species.

Dasi’s linkage between the woman, prostitute, mother and the “woman who dies in the burning flames with her husband,” or *sati,* as members of a common species with men highlights both the distance and proximity between these roles in Bengali society in the mid to late 19th century. Dasi would play all four roles onstage, a *sati,* at frequent physical peril to herself. *Sati* as rite is a Hindu funerary practice where a widow burns herself on the funeral pyre of her husband as the

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2 I do not wish to rehearse a prejudice for Western notions of individualism here. Dasi’s notion of self and rights was deeply rooted in the Hindu religion and Kolkata society at the time. Her language for talking about her role and rights was mediated by these experiences and she did not make claims about politics or subjecthood that can be easily co-opted into a Western (feminist) individualist agenda. In fact, she speaks of herself diminutively in both autobiographies and while railing against the social and religious practices that have marginalized her, she frames herself as a “great sinner” and remarks at the end of *My Story* that: “This is the only prayer of this unfortunate, destitute, fallen woman” (114). Her choice of language is certainly making use of what is available to her as “socially respectable” and in keeping with her devout faith as well as maintaining a tone of respect that does not marginalize her further within polite society. Dasi’s autobiographies must be read through the complicated landscape of Bengali religion and culture at the time and she is not to be judged either as powerless or a nascent femininity according to a contemporary or Western understanding of the term.
sign of ultimate wifely devotion. Sati is also a goddess and a name for a devoted wife. The practice of sati was a major site of conflict in the 19th century, particularly in Bengal, between British colonial administrators and Indian reformists and traditionalists alike. Sati was viewed as a paradigmatic example of Indian brutality and backwardness, despite a persistent British and European fascination with the custom.

This has been attested to recently in Pompa Banerjee’s account of the pre-colonial European obsession with sati in Burning Women: Widows, Witches and Early Modern Travelers in India. Banerjee argues that European travelers’ encounters with Indians, and particularly their witnessing of sati, had an immense impact on the formation of European identities around matters of gender and sexuality. Banerjee posits that the import of images of sati into Europe and their similarities with other images and accounts of punitive violence against women (particularly witch burnings) indicate that the formation of (Western) female identity at that time cannot be considered an exclusively European formation. This influence, however, was not necessarily acknowledged or obvious to the producers of these representations. Banerjee further suggests that this denial represents a repression on the part of European (male) subjects who only recognize violence against women produced by the “Other” as primitive. She posits that:

…despite the differences in historical and social motivations for widowburning and witchburning that coded one as a heroic sacrifice and the other as a punishment, both spectacles required the burning of women before witnesses, and both seem to have been critical for the maintenance of their respective patriarchal orders.

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3 Sati refers to the burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband but “…in the original Sanskrit meaning, the word ‘sati’ means a virtuous or a chaste woman.” There has often been a distinction made between the rite (“suttee” according to the British) and the woman (sati) but following Sakuntala Narasimhan, I have chosen to collapse this distinction and refer to the act and the woman herself as sati. As Narasimhan points out, the literal meaning of sati has been transformed through its years of usage, and the use of the one term to denote the range of practices associated with its evolution highlights its constructedness. See Sakuntala Narasimhan, Sati: Widow Burning in India, New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland: Anchor Books and Doubleday, 1990, “A Note by the Author.” I have also chosen to italicize sati throughout my paper to emphasize its untranslatability into the English language. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses “Sati” in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” while Lata Mani elects to use “sati” in Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India.

In the case of witchburning, order was maintained against evil, while *sati* confirmed the relative civility of European patriarchy in comparison with its Indian counterpart. Yet both depended on visual spectacle and were consciously staged as what I will call “productions” in the theatrical sense, although they also aided in the production of social subjects. Banerjee draws attention to the fact that: “Textual and iconographic productions of *sati* in India and witchburning in Europe were *visually, arrestingly alike.*”\(^5\) This notion of the visual which includes a set (the pyre, the scaffold), props (sticks to hold the widow down on the pyre, firewood), and characters (the sacrificed widow/witch, male spectators) supports a notion of these act as theatrical and social productions that rely on a series of recognizable tropes to tell a story about the maintenance of social and religious order. The European reading of *sati* as primitive and backwards involves a necessary denial of their own brutalities and I would like to suggest that this denial is akin to their own refusal to acknowledge the literal and epistemic violence and brutality of the colonial mission itself.

Significantly, the “burning woman” did not only offer herself as a convenient confirmation of the good intentions of the 19\(^{th}\) century British colonial government in India. On March 15, 1895, in the British colony of Ireland, Bridget Cleary was burned to death over the furnace grate in her home in County Tipperary, Ireland by her husband, as a group of neighbors and relatives looked on.\(^6\) Her death was the climax of a grueling nine-day “fairy trial” in her home conducted by these same people. This trial consisted of being force-fed milk with bitter herbs, threatened with fire, and doused with urine to rid her of the fairy that was alleged to have taken over her body. Those responsible for her death, including husband, Michael Cleary, were not convicted of murder, but rather manslaughter and other various smaller offenses due to the ambiguity and bizarre nature of the crime.

\(^5\) Ibid, 4.
\(^6\) Those present during her “fairy trial” and subsequent death who were charged by the court include: Patrick Boland (father), Mary Kennedy (aunt), Patrick and James Kennedy (cousins), and Jack Dunne (family friend and *seanchaí*, storyteller).
These events proved significant far beyond County Tipperary, Ireland, as the brutal nature of Bridget’s death prompted criticism that Ireland was too “primitive” to be trusted with its own governance due to the “backwards” beliefs of its people. Significantly, Bridget and all the other participants in the crime were from the “labouring” class, which deeply colored the charges of “Irish” primitivism brought against them. They were positioned in opposition to the upwardly striving Catholic/Christian Irish middle class that was supposedly eager for the onset of modernity in Ireland, which certainly would shun practices of pagan belief and wife-burning. A broadside from the time concerning Cleary’s death reads: “Some awful torments she did suffer before she met her death/And her own relatives done the deed without the least regret,/The fairy doctor mixed the herbs to be given to a witch,/But they gave them to a Christian then roasted her and threw in a ditch.” Besides the fact that Bridget was thought to be a fairy, and not a witch, this writer is locating the tragedy of the incident in the fact that a Christian was absorbed into a system of pagan belief and paid with her life, rather than the death of the woman in general.

Bridget’s Christianized and passively feminized body therefore enters the public imagination in order to cleanse Ireland of blame for its backwardness. For Ireland to prove itself as worthy of being free from British influence, Bridget’s death had to be proved an act of insanity against an undeserving and model modern Irish female. As Susan Cannon Harris writes, “Irish political discourse…had a tradition of identifying the body politic with the human body and a tradition of cementing that identification through the conflation of the Irish wife/mother’s body with the Irish home, the Irish economy and the Irish population.” Thus, for the Irish “home” to be reconceived as a nation worthy of independence, Bridget’s death had to be viewed as a casualty of Ireland’s uncomfortable transition to modernity. Blame did not directly lay with the perpetrators of her death, nor did it lie with the Irish people and their “culture” as a whole.

By bringing the event of Bridget Cleary’s death into conversation with the discourses surrounding sati, I seek to interrogate how the (fiery) bodies of colonized women are called into service as “neither the subjects nor the primary concerns” of the symbolic discourses of British colonial rule but rather “ground” for claims not just about the superiority of British colonial culture but the status of India and Ireland’s relationship to modernity and potential for “self-rule.” The repetition of burning women dragged before witnesses persists in early modern and modern European and Indian history as an indication of the power of not only patriarchal order as it relates to women, but the strength of those cultures more generally, particularly in regards to religious tradition.

If these burning women serve neither as a true “subject” or “concern” of discourse, especially if they exceed its bound of acceptability, their bodies are forced to operate at the level of a spectacle to be consumed. A spectacle, judging from the persistent interest in all these case, that betrays a level of perverse pleasure on the part of its observers and tireless recounters and/or defenders. This argument is corroborated through a recurring interest in Cleary’s case and the practice of sati that reveals itself through many different kinds of cultural productions at the time and up until our present day. The deaths of these women continue to be obsessively staged in the space of textual accounts in newspapers and books, the theatre, song, and folklore. In the past 10 years alone, Bridget Cleary has been the subject of several books, television documentaries, a play, and a planned film and the massive interest in Roop Kanwar’s 1987 sati in Rajasthan was represented by a proliferation of cultural artifacts. A 1988 article in The New Internationalist noted that: “Incredibly, the outlawed custom of sati is making a come-back in India. Postcards glorifying the gruesome practice are widely available. Popular movies about widow-burning are all the rage.”

Amid doubts about her willing participation, the case of Kanwar’s death by sati drew global attention.

and reignited debate over the practice worldwide, thanks in no small part to the protests of female activists in Rajasthan. Their more central role in the ensuing controversy is a sharp contrast to the environment of the early 19th century in which women were excluded from discussions around sati. Ultimately, the 11 people accused of taking a part in her death, including Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) legislator and State party vice-president Rajendra Singh Rathore, would be acquitted for “lack of evidence” on January 31, 2004, sixteen years later, to the chagrin of many activists who had worked to bring them to justice.\(^9\) Even at the time of her death, police officers expressed ambivalence about the guilt of those involved in her death:

> While top police officials have almost all been unanimous in declaring that the offenders in the sati incident would be severely dealt with and punished for murder, they all viewed the continuing practice of sati in a different light: Not all of them considered it a crime as such, but rather the result of a distorted, ‘conservative’ attitude.\(^10\)

These feelings significantly echo the court’s final verdict in the case of the defendants in Bridget Cleary’s death, which found it difficult to locate blame in the case, and went instead with lesser charges than murder against the defendants.

Ashis Nandy notoriously criticized the Indian elite upper and middle classes for blaming this case on the backwardness of the “traditional” Indian, writing:

> The persistence of culture is a form of resistance, and those seeking hegemony in the realm of political economy cannot afford to leave culture alone... Roop’s tragically unnecessary death has become for the urban uprooted bourgeoisie another marker of the backwardness of the traditional Indian, even though responsibility for the death should be shared for the social forces that these Westernized Indians have supported handsomely. These forces constitute the kind of attack on traditional lifestyles that has resulted in epidemics of sati in the past.\(^11\)


\(^10\) Trial by Fire, 6. I would like to note here that the reaction of the police officials in this case is similar to the one of the jury in the Bridget Cleary case. Both cases existed somewhere a crime and superstitious practice, and therefore, the actions of the defendants were viewed in an adjusted light.

Nandy situates sati as a practice that remains resolutely in the present, but yet emphasizes a necessary understanding of its linkage with a past firmly rooted in its present as well. Neither sati, which continues to occur sporadically, or the death of Bridget Cleary, which occurred at a key moment of change in Ireland’s modern history, can therefore be read as static events and symbols, linked to a lingering traditional past, that are nonetheless luridly compelling in the light of the “modern” age. By attending to the media, scholarly and discursive productions regarding these cases as “performances” firmly implicating the “social forces’ present, we may be aided in further understanding the continuing currency of women’s body as the guarantor of nation and/or modernity, even in far removed spaces at two ends of the British Empire. In keeping with the aims of transnational feminism, this project enables the colonial projects of India and Ireland and their contemporary experiences of nationalism to be brought into conversation with each other, not to flatten their aims, or equate their (gendered) casualities but to ask how imperialism and ensuing nationalisms can be understood as a network of material and symbolic references that did not exhaust their purchase in the 19th century but continue to influence how history is written and the (never) final resting places of “Mother(s)” India and Ireland.
Works Cited


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