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***Sati* and Performativity: Towards a Western Feminist Understanding of *Sati*.**

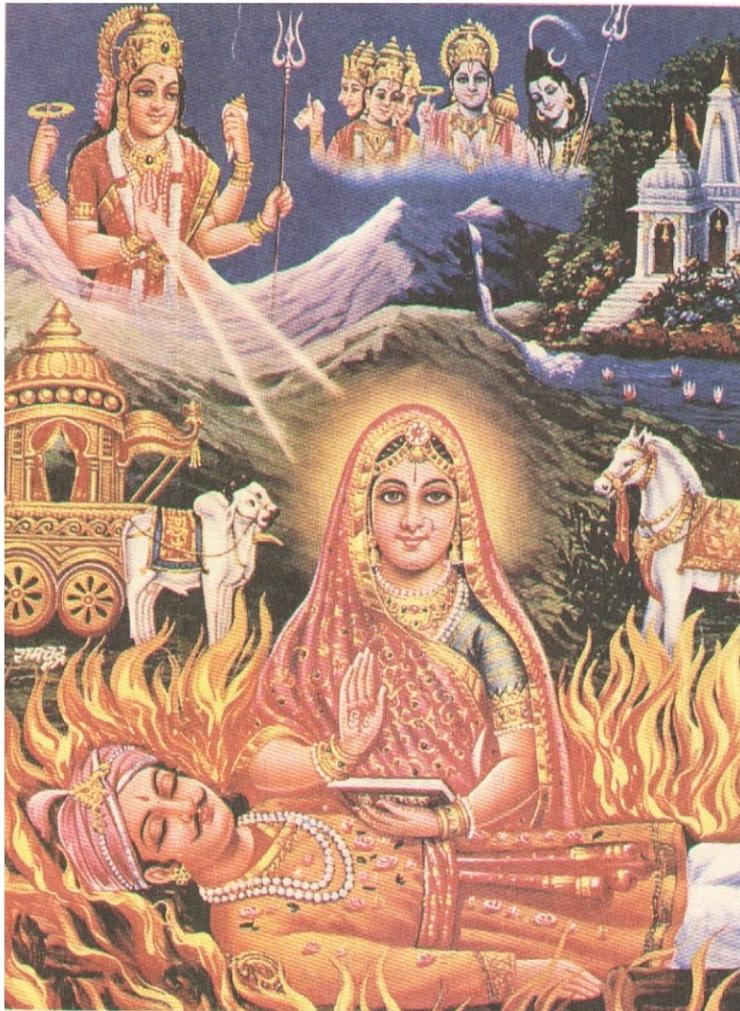
ABSTRACT

This article explores some of the conceptual and representational difficulties *sati* presents for Western feminist analysis, and draws upon Judith Butler's concept of performativity to generate an account of the constitution of *satis*' subjectivities and agencies that may also provide a basis for theoretical and political contestations of *sati*.

In September 1987, Roop Kanwar accompanied a procession of several hundred people through Deorala village, Rajasthan, India, circled her husband's funeral pyre three times, mounted it and burned to death.¹ Against the impossibility of knowing either what 'really happened' or what it meant, the event gave rise to a range of interpretations, loosely organised by an opposition between those who saw that 18-year-old Roop burned herself voluntarily and those who saw that she was murdered. In one version her immolation made Roop a *sati*², a deity whose self-sacrifice was an expression of conjugal devotion and entirely a product of her own free will; she had announced her intention of becoming a *sati* and resisted all attempts to dissuade her, and blessed the watching crowd, smiling calmly as the flames danced around her. In other versions she had tried to hide, was pressured and possibly drugged, and dragged screaming through the village, attempted three times to escape the pyre and was pushed back onto it by the crowd. These conflicting interpretations are tied to broader arguments about *sati* itself. For its defenders, *sati* is part of a timeless religious and cultural tradition constantly threatened by modernisation, westernisation and secularism.³ Many Hindus, though, condemn *sati* as a 'social evil', and for many, particularly those Hindu women who protested against both the burning of Roop and its valorisation as a *sati*, the glorification of *sati* deaths crystallises a contradiction between the exaltation of an idealised Hindu femininity and an often-violent devaluation of women's lives.

Debates about *sati*'s moral and legal status, particularly from the early 19th century when the British representation of *satis* as victims of uncivilised native custom helped to

justify imperialism in terms of the rescue and protection of Indian women, tend to be divided over the questions of the woman's subjectivity and agency, construed in terms of her willingness or otherwise to burn with her husband.⁴ Understanding *sati* in mutually exclusive terms of volition or force presents something of a political and theoretical impasse, however, especially for Western feminisms: to identify all *satis* as victims of patriarchy risks denying their agency, and replicating an imperialist discourse that Gayatri Spivak summarises as "white men ... saving brown women from brown men" and argues has been reproduced by "white women" (1988, 297) from 19th century missionaries onward; yet to conceive of *sati* as voluntary, to invest *satis* with agency, is to suggest that women choose and orchestrate their own deaths and risk reproducing those discourses that glorify *sati* as a heroic act of self-sacrifice.



A Romantic Depiction of *Sati*. National Portrait Gallery, London, reproduced in Dalrymple 1997, *The Australian*, April 5-6, Weekend Review, 5. In this painting, the *sati* sits serene amidst the flames with her right hand raised in a gesture of reassurance or blessing. She is in turn blessed by the goddess Durga/Sati, and watched over by the major Hindu male deities: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. **ANY PERMISSION NEEDED FOR THIS IMAGE?**

Almost immediately after the Deorala *sati*, Indian women scholars and activists supported by a range of other social groups and individuals, including “huge numbers of women, largely rural” (Kumar 1998, 181; and see also Kishwar and Vanita 1987, 21) moved to condemn the burning of Roop and its glorification as a *sati* death. Two days after the immolation, a group of women activists met with Harideo Joshi, Chief Minister of Rajasthan, to demand that action be taken against those involved. Joshi argued that the *sati* was a purely religious matter in which the state government could not interfere

(Tully 1991, 205; Narasimhan 1998, 3). Partly because of pressure exerted by women's groups, however, police began formal investigations and made some arrests (Narasimhan 1998, 6). The case was at first registered as one of abetment to suicide. Again, it was partly as a result of the protest of women activists, who insisted that the case should be tried under homicide laws, that the charge was changed to one of murder (Narasimhan 1998, 118).

Several Indian women scholars⁵ argue that men of the three most important castes in Rajasthan—Rajputs, the ruling warrior and landowning caste whose image is greatly boosted by a Rajput *sati*; Brahmins, whose prestige depends upon their priestly role and their affirmation of a particular version of 'tradition'; and Marwari merchants for whom a *sati* is both auspicious, and an auspicious opportunity to create wealth—combined to promote Roop's death as a *sati* to serve their own political, religious, and economic interests. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita argue that Hindu nationalist (*Hindutva*) politicians also seized upon the *sati* in order to create unity—and a unified vote bank—both among the internally divided Rajput community and as part of a broader revivalist Hinduism (1987, 18). The emphasis on 'tradition' thus obscures the ways *sati* can be used to reinforce caste and communal identities “along 'modern' lines, with modern methods of campaigning and organising, modern arguments, and for modern ends, such as the reformation of electoral blocks and caste and communal representation within the state” (Kumar 1998, 179).

Women activists again sought the intervention of the Chief Minister to prevent a *chunari mahotsav*, or veil festival, scheduled to commemorate Roop's death and, when they received no response, filed a writ petition in the High Court and led a protest march in Jaipur. This march, which attracted only a few hundred people, clearly posed little political threat, and the state government continued to regard the celebration as a matter of religion (Narasimhan 1998, 4). As a result of the application by women's groups, however, the High Court issued an injunction the day before the *chunari mahotsav* (Kumar 1998, 176). This ostensibly directed the Rajasthan state government to prevent the glorification ceremony, but allowed for “family worship”.⁶ Although police and civil administrators were sent to Deorala to ensure the order was enforced, the ceremony was also advanced by two hours, possibly in order to pre-empt attempts at intervention (Tully 1991, 207; Narasimhan 1998, 222) and thousands arrived. The flames of the pyre, kept alight since the *sati*, were ritually extinguished with milk and water from the

Ganges, and a *chunari* embroidered with gold thread was draped over the trident and set alight by Roop's brothers (Narasimhan 1998, 5).

According to Narasimhan, the two families had acquired "instant celebrity status"; the room Roop had shared with her husband in her marital home became "consecrated as a site for pilgrims to view" (Oldenberg 1994, 107) and over 800 wayside stalls sprang up, selling souvenirs, coconuts, snacks, toys, incense, and commemorative icons. Vishal Mangalwadi (*Indian Express* 19 September 1987, cited in Narasimhan 1998, 43) reported that "tens of thousands of women and young girls worshipped the photographs of 'Mahasati Roop' and invoked her blessings", while "grim looking" sword-wielding Rajput youths guarded the pyre. Most villagers Mangalwadi spoke to insisted that Roop's "act was a voluntary act of heroic courage... that had made her a goddess and given her the power to answer the prayers of her devotees". There were a few dissenting voices, however, particularly among village women critical of the practice of *sati* and cynical about its religious merits. Rani Devi, for instance, told Mangalwadi that if Roop's act had been voluntary it was only because she knew what life as a Rajput widow held in store. Kishwar and Vanita, who attended the *chunari mahotsav*, observe that it had the "flavour of a political rally, a show of strength vis-à-vis a political adversary rather than devotion to a deity" (1987, 16).

The Deorala *sati* presented a difficulty for the central government under Rajiv Gandhi, which faced pressure to respond to the incident, and yet was unwilling to offend pro-*sati* groups, particularly the powerful Rajput lobby (Gandhi 1988, 127). Rather than taking steps to enforce existing laws, under which those who took an active role in burning a woman to death could be charged with murder, the central government ordered the Rajasthan Chief Minister to pass legislation specifically against *sati*.⁷ The new legislation made it a criminal offence to directly or indirectly abet the attempt or the commission of *sati*, "irrespective of whether [it] is claimed to be voluntary on the part of the widow or otherwise" and to glorify *sati* in any way. As Nair (2000, 240-241) and Narasimhan (1998, 117-118) point out, however, the legislation also makes it a crime for a woman to "attempt to commit *sati*" or to perform "any act towards such commission".⁸ This would mean that if a woman's immolation were prevented at any point, even if she had been physically or otherwise coerced or had struggled to escape, she would be liable to prosecution. Paradoxically, in refusing to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary *sati*, the law also therefore produced the woman as a criminal. Although the legislation acknowledges that there may be elements of pressure and persuasion in an

immolation, its definition of abetment in terms of “encouraging a woman... to remain fixed in her resolve to commit *sati*” or “aiding the... woman in her decision to commit *sati*” treats these transactions as either contests or collaborations between equals. In this sense, the legislation equates *sati* with suicide—the action of the woman who might be ‘abetted’ by others—rather than with murder. Indian women scholars and activists contest this equation on several grounds: it allows “woman-killers” to “get off lightly for merely abetting suicide” (Daruwala 1988, cited in Narasimhan 1998, 118); even when the right to suicide exists in law, it is neither socially encouraged nor a public spectacle (Chuhrawat 1988, cited in Narasimhan 1998, 119); that “generally the pyre is lit by someone other than the woman” (Nair 1998, 118); and, perhaps most importantly, that it represents “the oppressed, exploited and vulnerable woman as a free woman making a free choice” (Gandhi and Shah 1991, 223-224). As Nair argues, the assumption that a woman is an “untrammelled subject, freely exercising her will... mask[s] the way in which many women are left with little or no choice in such circumstances” (2000, 240). This assumption also means that the legislation designed to protect the woman as a victim actually reinforces the idea of her agency by making her guilty of a crime.

The limitations of appeals to the law, in particular, suggest that questions of agency in *sati* be re-thought both theoretically and strategically. The contestation of meaning in the wake of Roop’s death and the difficulties encountered by Indian women seeking to counter its glorification—along with the colonial history of intervention in *sati*—point to the necessity of conceptualising a *sati* otherwise than as a passive ‘victim’ who must be rescued or as a subject whose agency lies in her desire to die; or, as in the legislation, adopting an ambivalent position in which she is simultaneously both. The necessity of conceptualising *sati* otherwise than through the dichotomy created by adopting ‘victim’ and ‘agent’ as mutually exclusive forms of subjectivity, suggests that a re-thinking of concepts of subjectivity and agency is needed in the context of *sati*.

Judith Butler’s conception of performativity seems to offer a means of such rethinking since it highlights the ways regulatory cultural and symbolic practices are productive and constitutive, but not fully determining, of the subject. Butler argues that sexed and gendered subjectivities are produced as the effects of an identification with, and performative reiteration or repetition of, symbolic norms. This performative constitution of subjectivity is also a necessary precondition of agency, since it permits the emergence and stabilisation of subjects who are capable of ‘action’. The necessity of their reiteration, which also highlights the extent to which they are neither ‘natural’ nor

inevitable, means they are potentially open to change in the reiterative practices of subjects. Symbolic norms are therefore durable and persistent, but not immutable or fully determining, especially because they also produce subjects with a capacity to subvert or resist them.

One of the central difficulties in the representation of *satis*' agency lies in a received grammar that implies what Butler calls a "doer behind the deed" (1990, 142). It is possible to write "the woman immolates herself" —as if she were the subject, the author and agent, of her actions—or "the woman is immolated". The passive grammatical construction means that the agent of her immolation might be named—as Hindu religious culture, Brahman priests, her family-in-law, fire itself, or even a supernatural or divine agent like *sat*—or intransitively undetermined. Either phrase, however, belies the complexity of both the broader relationships between discursive formations and subjects and the specific transactions between the *sati* and those around her. An understanding of agency as an effect of performativity offers a way of rethinking those relations, especially because it does not preclude the possibility of *satis*' agency, yet may be helpful in challenging certain representations of that agency.

This idea, alongside Butler's theoretical challenges to the idea of a transparent or direct relationship between intentions, speech, actions and effects, seems to offer a way of understanding the relations between the discursive constructions that underpin *sati*, the identifications and identities these might encourage/produce, and the complex processes through which a woman might be constituted, and constitute herself—in thought, speech, and action—as a *sati*. By creating a theoretical space in which a *sati*'s subjectivity may be seen as an effect of discourses, but not as fully determined by or reducible to them, and her agency may be seen as contingent, conditional, and often over-determined, but not absent or foreclosed, such an understanding might challenge the glorification of *sati* as an act of pure free-will without reproducing imperialist constructions of the *sati* as a passive victim.

Perfect Woman, Ideal Sati

If *satis* are worshipped much as goddesses are, it is perhaps because in the hours before her death and in a different way after it a *sati* is represented—and in some cases appears to represent herself —as a powerful agent. In what follows I move loosely through the trajectory by which a woman is thought to become a *sati* to try to show that,

despite this view, a woman's agency in *sati* is both culturally shaped and highly circumscribed.

A *sati* is a ritualised event involving a series of subjective and bodily transformations.⁹ The woman's decision to become a *sati*, expressed by a formal vow, or *vrat*, must be spontaneous and wholly her own. Her pronouncement of the vow makes her a *sativrata*, confirms and consummates her conjugal devotion—thus absolving her of responsibility for her husband's death¹⁰—and sets the rite in motion, usually irrevocably, by simultaneously inviting and unleashing the power of *sat*, the supernatural truth power that possesses a *sati*. In the final hours of her life, the *sat* enables a *sati* to perform a range of miracles; she may produce fire or hot coals in her hands and endure their heat without flinching and, finally, will the pyre to light itself. Through this metaphysical power, the woman also gains access to another power, both social and supernatural and, as Lyndsey Harlan (1994: 81) points out, unknown at any other time of her life: a capacity for authoritative speech expressed through the series of blessings, curses and proscriptions she utters in the hours before her death.

Resisting any efforts to deter her, the *sati* will calmly request that preparations for the rite proceed, bathe, and dress in her bridal sari and jewels, symbolically reaffirming her marital status. She will remain cheerful and serene at this most auspicious time of her life. After circumambulating the pyre, three or more usually seven times, the *sati* makes a gesture of final farewell and with perfect composure climbs upon it and takes her husband's head in her lap or reclines beside him. Even when the flames reach her, she retains her tranquillity and continues to bless the crowd; her powers of virtue and truth radiate outward to all who witness and venerate her action, and for whom what is seen is not a woman burned agonisingly to death but divinity, especially imagined as the feminine force of *shakti*, painlessly manifesting itself.¹¹ Her fiery *sat* cremates both the woman and her husband and she is transformed again, this time into a *satimata* (*sati* mother) joining with other *satimatas* who, together with Sati the goddess wife of Shiva, compose the Goddess Sati.

This is the ideal *sati* narrative, contested in many colonial constructions of the *sati* as a victim, and also sought to be countered in the present, especially by feminist writers and activists who argue *sati* is an act of violence against women produced by a specific nexus of patriarchal, caste, communalist and nationalist politics.

Since a woman's *sati*-hood is predicated first and foremost upon her pronouncement of the *sativrat*—or gestures that may be interpreted as such—reading this

act of speech and the blessings or curses that follow from it beside Butler's idea that the performative 'powers' of speech are sedimented effects of reiterative practices may enable their reconceptualisation, which might in turn yield alternative ways of conceptualising *satis*' subjectivity and agency.

Speech as Instrument: The Sati's Vow

A *sati* is endowed with self-agency to the extent that she speaks and to the extent that her speech is seen as having a power of its own, a view also reflected in conventional speech-act theory, where a performative speech-act is defined as that which enacts or produces what it names ('I pronounce you married'; 'I will become a *sati*') and seems to do so by virtue of the speaker's will and intention. Butler displaces the centrality of the speaker's intention by arguing that, to be successful, a performative must repeat a coded or iterable utterance that is identifiable as such. This productive capacity of discourse is therefore "derivative, a form of cultural iterability or re-articulation" (1993, 107) rather than a function of an originating will.

This decentring of intentionality provides a grounds for reading the *sativrat*, and thus also the subjectivity of the woman who speaks it, otherwise than in terms of a dichotomy of agent/victim. In the ideology of *sati*, and the biographical narratives it organises, the woman appears as the originator of the *sativrat*, which is taken as a transparent expression of her will and sign of her agency. In the terms suggested by Butler, however, the capacity of the vow to enact what it names is contingent upon its being a repetition, a "coded and iterable utterance". It could not "act" as the *sativrat* if it were not a "citation of itself" (1997, 80; **EMPHASIS ADDED?Emphasis in original**), its force recognisable from previous instances. The woman can appear as the originating author of her speech, and this speech appear spontaneous, only to the extent to which this necessary quality of citationality "remains unmarked" (Butler 1993, 13). If the citationality of the *sativrat* were "marked", it might be read as a kind of culturally scripted utterance in a dialogue between the woman and other participants and, within and behind this, an exchange between the woman-as-subject and pre-existing discursive structures. Attempts to dissuade her might then be seen as part of this dialogue, since they appear to be formalities that actually help to establish and confirm her desire and ability to become a *sati*.¹²

Butler also re-elaborates the concept of performative agency in speech by contesting an assumption that intentions are always properly materialised in utterances,

and utterances materialised in deeds. She argues that because there is always a “potential incommensurability between intention and utterance (not saying what one means), utterance and action (not doing what one says), and intention and action (not doing what one meant)” (1997, 92), speech is always, to some degree, unstable, out of control or “excitable”. This inherent instability frees speech from the absolute and originary intention of a sovereign subject, which in turn opens a space for a conception of agency as an effect of linguistic “enabling constraints” (1997, 16) This does not suggest that a *sati* cannot “mean” or believe in the power of her vow—or that she has no possibility of exercising agency—but it complicates the subjective agency that is supposed to be contained in the *sativrat*.

An understanding of the *sativrat* as a speech-act whose content can be understood in terms of the action it performs is also sustained by a distinction Butler calls that between illocutionary performatives, those speech acts that enact what they say in the moment of utterance, and perlocutionary performatives or acts of speech whose effects are deferred rather than synchronous with the utterance (1997, 2). The *sativrat* would seem to be an instance of the former; its effects are immediate in that the woman becomes a *sativrata* in and through the moment of utterance and its deferred effect, her immolation, is a logical consequence of this transformation. The indeterminacy of this speech-act, however, is underscored by Butler’s argument that the performative power of an illocutionary speech act relies on forms of convention, ceremonial or ritual, whose necessary priority undercuts the idea of its instantaneous effect. While the illocutionary force of the *sativrat* appears to produce the woman-as-*sati* in the moment of utterance, Butler’s argument that the apparent power of an illocutionary performative to execute its action in the moment of utterance is “an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance” (1997, 3) challenges the notion that the woman’s pronouncement of this vow constitutes a singular, self-contained and self-willed expression of her agency.

Further Acts of Speech Acts: The Blessings, Curses and Proscriptions of the *Sativrata*

During the liminal period between the pronouncement of the *sativrat* and her immolation, the woman speaks from what Veena Das calls “the zone between two deaths” (2000, 207). Since she is believed to have already renounced life, and therefore progressed beyond it, the *sativrata* has access to what Harlan argues is an extraordinary verbal authority: she bestows blessings

upon those who venerate her; utters curses against those with whom she is angry, especially those who obstruct or fail to assist her; and issues a series of ritual prohibitions that show that “a *sati*’s will must be respected and her desires remembered” (Harlan 1994, 84).¹³ The blessings, curses and proscriptions a *sati* is authorised to utter by virtue of having spoken the *sativrat* thus presume and reinforce the idea that her vow was freely made. Like the *sativrat* itself, however, they may be read as citations embedded in institutionalised symbolic structures that both predate and outlast them.

A *sati*’s blessings generally serve to protect those who receive them against the vagaries of nature—illness, natural disasters, infertility—by promising physical and material well-being and, in particular, the boon of sons (Courtright 1994, 40-41). Her curses (*srap*) and proscriptions (*ok*) are also taken, Harlan (1994, 84-85) argues, as vehicles of benevolent maternal instruction to the family who will honour her after her death. While curses are directed primarily at men they also—directly or indirectly— affect women. For instance, a *sativrata* commonly curses men with infertility, but since infertility is deemed a ‘woman’s problem’, no matter how many times a cursed man might marry, if he produces no offspring, it is his wives who are deemed infertile (Harlan 1994, 86). Though not every *sativrata* pronounces a curse, each is expected to establish an *ok*, proscribing certain practices or possessions—generally those with connotations of *saubhagya*, which can be defined as “conjugal happiness” (Weinberger-Thomas 1999, 105) or “female auspiciousness” (Harlan 1994, 88) and is perhaps both since female auspiciousness consists primarily in conjugality and fertility—to be observed by women of her husband’s family.¹⁴

A *sati*’s blessings, curses and proscriptions help to reinforce the projection of both supernatural power and more earthly volition and authority signalled and unleashed by the *sativrat*. The self-agency, however, that both the vow and the speech-acts that follow from it presuppose, and are supposed to express, is complicated by the idea that they only gain their efficacy through being embedded in a chain of cultural reiteration. There is a limited repertoire from which the *sati* may select, and items in that repertoire serve either to underpin patriarchal discourse or to explain away the participation or agency of others involved in a *sati*. A *sati*’s curses and proscriptions might be interpreted as an indirect means of expressing anger or avenging herself upon her family-in-law, but this anger and vengeance are ultimately contained within the reinforcement of patriarchal norms.¹⁵ They require that women remember and respect not only a *sati*’s sacrifice in self-immolation, but also the series of sacrifices she performed as a *pativrata*, thus

underscoring the desirability of *pativrata* morality. Worshipping a *sati* also helps a woman to increase her *sat*, which enables her to be a better *pativrata*, and would ultimately enable her to become a *sati* should her husband predecease her (Harlan 1994, 89). Moreover, desire for a *sati*'s blessings and, perhaps more importantly, fear of her curse, also become useful rationales for obeying the wishes expressed by the *sativrat*, for not thwarting the woman's will and preventing the immolation. Blessings, curses, and proscriptions therefore function as reassuring signs both of a *sati*'s volition, and of the good intentions of those who obey her by carrying out the immolation and later by conforming to her demands. This network of speech-acts thus helps to absolve the family and the community of complicity in her death.

“Intentionality Gone Awry”: Resignification and “Perilous Expropriation”

Butler argues that, since the effects of speech are both a product of prior effects and deferred rather than immediate, “intentionality can go awry” in a dissemination of, often unintended, effects that are beyond the control of the speaking subject (1997, 27-28). If the disjunctures between intentions, speech and actions suggest that a woman's pronouncement of the *sativrat* need not necessarily be read as transparent evidence of her desire to be burned to death, the “excitability” of speech and the deferral of its effects suggest that a *sati*'s death might involve “intentionality gone awry”. A woman's utterance of the *sativrat* signals the presence of *sat*, which is the “prerequisite” for becoming a *sati*. Once spoken, however, it appears to take on a life of its own and to have effects—both upon the woman herself and those around her—that are not only beyond her control, but which seem to foreclose, or at least radically contain, her agential initiative.

The irruption of *sat* has both a circular trajectory and a circular logic. It is foreshadowed by portents—dreams, visions or certain propensities—that disclose a woman's destiny as a *sati*, but whose meaning only becomes clear retrospectively.¹⁶ Its force manifests itself in a *sati*'s ability to perform a series of miracles—both before and after her death—that by, revealing the presence of *sat*, also affirm her *sati*-hood, and therefore her volition.¹⁷ *Sat*, divine intervention, miracles and dreams—or the meanings given to them—thus help to reinforce the idea that the woman's death is voluntary, and also provide a means of concealing or denying the responsibility of individuals and the community in burning her. The concept of *sat* also introduces complications to the question of a woman's agency in *sati*: this concept may be flexible enough to

incorporate and re-define any extreme emotional state, such as that of a woman upon learning she has been widowed; a *sativrata* appears at once to possess and be possessed by the power of *sat* and in this sense, while her agency is equated with the potency of *sat*, it is also subsumed by it. Moreover, the chief arbiters of whether a woman possesses *sat* seem to be those around her who interpret her dreams, speech or gestures, or attest to miracles. These are the same people, usually her husband's family, whose eagerness to be part of such an auspicious event as a *sati* may shape what follows in ways that may be in themselves coercive, especially since a woman who changes her mind, or who attempts to escape the pyre, brings disgrace upon herself and her family, and the threat of disaster to her community. Ironically then, at the very moment a woman is deemed to be most powerful, it may be almost impossible for her to do other than reflect the desires of those around her.

Here then, the citationality of the performative that produces the possibility of agency at the same time produces the possibility of a "perilous expropriation" (Butler 1997, 93) that might enable woman burning to be (re)signified as *sati* in the first place and also enable the actions of those around a *sati* to be represented as divine intervention or as miracles performed by the power of *sat*.

While the subjectivity constituted by a woman's possession of or by the power of *sat* is transitional, it is also believed to be an expression of her innate disposition, cumulatively laid down throughout a long personal and *karmic* history of actions that precedes her birth and continues after her death.

Revelations of Inherent *Sati*-hood: a *Sati*'s *Bhava*

Catherine Weinberger-Thomas reports that people around a *sati* will say both that "the *sat* has risen" and that "the *bhav* has come on" (1999:22), where the latter indicates the irruption of the former. The Sanskrit term *bhav*, or *bhava*, describes a dominant emotion colouring a given moment that is rooted in and therefore reveals, one's intrinsic nature (*svabhava*) (Weinberger-Thomas 1999, 276). The English word 'feeling' perhaps cannot properly convey the depth this term implies: "*bhava* means you are in the total. In that *bhava*, one becomes one with god ... you are the innermost, not the surface, it is the real seat of *bhava* that is towards the divine only" (Meena 2002, personal communication).¹⁸ Weinberger-Thomas argues that a subjective landscape, with "unconditional love and absolute fidelity in the foreground, and self-sacrifice as the

proof of that love and devotion in the background, is that which defines, quite precisely, the *bhava* of the *sati*” (1999, 19).

The *sat* rises; the *bhav* comes on (*bhav-ana*). While both phrases refer to subjective experience, their interplay, and the expressions themselves—their indirect grammatical turn—betray a shifting of agency and a certain circularity and inevitability. Since a woman’s *sati*-hood, as the sign and seal of her virtue, is revealed with the rising of *sat* that, always latent, discloses itself in an affective state, her *bhava*, which also reveals her underlying or innermost nature, her *svabhava*, in terms of an innate predisposition toward *sati*-hood, the idea of *sati* as an expression of the woman’s intrinsic nature and virtue becomes incontestable.

While the subjective experience of the *bhav* is, in a sense, impenetrable, Butler’s analysis of the performative construction of subjectivity might throw some light upon the constitution of the innermost self that, with the rising of the *sat* and the coming on of the *bhav*, is disclosed as the ‘*sati*-self’. I illustrate this argument by drawing upon Weinberger-Thomas’s description of the *bhav* “experienced” by the officiant at a *sati* ceremony she attended in 1993 in the home of a Rajput family whose son had been miraculously cured through the grace of *sati* Om Kanwar (1999, 169-173). Although it is not quite clear whether the *bhav* of Om has entered into the woman or her own *bhav* is brought on through contact with the divine force of Om, what does become clear, by the end of the account, is that the *bhav* is expressed, and perhaps produced, as a power of reiteration and re-citation:

The officiant intones a traditional chant ... ‘Long Live Mother *Sati*! ... may Om descend from the world of the *Satis* to tarry among her devotees; may she find embodiment in Her image’ ... [the women then take up a chant dedicated to Om] ... Suddenly the officiant begins addressing Om ... Like a distant storm that finally breaks, words burst forth out of the *bhav*, out of the tumult of emotions unleashed by the vision of Om through her image: ‘*Sati*, come down and offer us your blessings. O thou, who hast saved the soul of thy husband ... protect us, drive away all ills and calamities, O thou, who are the light of the Kaliyuga ... *Sati*-Dev’ ... the assembled faithful ... repeat each of her formulas in chorus ... Beside themselves, they sing the glories of the *sati* ... The officiant’s entire body is convulsing. Once again, she addresses the *sati* directly: ‘... Thou art not a female ancestor ... Thou art Dev’ ... The women ... run through every *sati* song

in their repertoire as the officiant sprinkles holy water over the image of Om ... The smoke, the heat, and the ardor of the devotees fill the air, which has become stifling (Weinberger-Thomas 1999, 172).

This account describes lyrically the transports involved in *sati* worship, but a more significant dimension of the ceremony emerges only after it, when Weinberger-Thomas is given a pamphlet published in Hindi by the “Mahasati Om Kanwar Trust” in Jharli, in which she finds “the words that the mystic rapture of the *bhav* had seemingly wrung out of the officiant” (1999, 173). This instance of ‘repetition’ might suggest something both of the subjectivating effects of discourse and of its performative capacity as an effect of citationality. Here, what appears to be and is perhaps experienced as absolutely personal, innate and spontaneous, is nevertheless expressed—and perhaps only expressible at all—through a network of pre-established, external and conventional words and images. This in turn, and by extension, might suggest that there can be no religious sentiment, no affective or even bodily experience, that is “free of an imaginary construction” (Butler 1990, 71) shaped by symbolic norms.

The concept of performativity stresses the idea that gendered subjectivities are constituted through everyday practices: that is, they are cumulative effects of subjects identifying with, and repeatedly ‘performing’, gender norms (Butler 1990; 1993). Where a discourse of *sati* worship is a part of the normative landscape, the long history by which a woman’s decision to become a *sati* is supposed to be formed might be thought of neither simply as her passive internalisation of discursive norms nor simply of her autonomous and discrete acts, but in terms rather of the sedimentary effects of their articulation.

Explanations for the origins of this decision rest upon the idea of an accumulation and sedimentation of ‘acts’ and ‘influences’ over many lifetimes. This is the concept of *samskara*—literally that which purifies—which refers both to the history of a person’s conduct and the formative influences that mould a person in this life as well as previous lives (Sangari and Vaid 1996, 291).

“The Fragrance of an Action that is Left in You”¹⁹

A woman’s *satitva*—simultaneously her virtue and her *sati*-hood—is both the product and the evidence of her “correct *samskara*”. According to Meena, *samskaras* are “certain things which go with you life after life”, and can result in *sati* since *samskaras* involve the woman’s “continuous purification” of her *bhava* which, upon the death of

her husband, “wakes up”, and “then [she] cannot resist to leave” (2002, personal communication). This purification involves (though is not confined to) the unflinching devotion and fidelity of the woman married in each of her rebirths to the same husband and in this sense, the *sati*’s decision, while seemingly spontaneous, unpredictable, and even uncontrollable, has its ‘origins’ in a ‘repetition of acts’, the assiduous ‘performance’ of gender norms in this and previous lives.

Like the idea of subjectification, the ‘double-sided’ constitution of the subject, the laying down of *samskaras*, the shaping of *sat*, and the purification of a woman’s *bhava* seem to involve both a subjection to cultural norms and an active form of self-production; according to Meena, the process of purifying one’s *bhava* is something like a yogic practice, a self-willed undertaking (2002, personal communication). The gradual acquisition of a disposition through repeated acts of marital devotion over many *pativrata* lifetimes—and the corporeal effects produced by the recitation of the *sativrat* which is a manifestation of this accumulation—seems to provide a kind of *karmic* version of Butler’s idea that each ‘performance’ of cultural norms serves both to reinscribe those norms upon and within the body and, in doing so, to constitute the materiality of the body.

The Embodiment of *Sat* and *Bhav*

A concept of performativity as a “regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantialising effects” (Butler 1990, 145) suggests that bodily materiality is at least partly produced as an effect of a reiteration of discursive norms (see also Butler 1997, 27). Reading the somatic changes that are believed to arise from the eruption of *sat* and the surfacing of *bhav*—and that transform the body of the woman into a ‘*sati* body’—in terms of the subjectivating and materialising effects of discourse means that they need not be dismissed as fictions, but can at the same time be viewed as at least partly shaped by certain regulatory cultural/linguistic structures.

This might be illustrated in the story of Hem Kanvar, burned in Devipura village in 1943. Hem’s hair was observed to stand on end and her dark complexion to turn “white and radiant” (Weinberger-Thomas 1999, 138); however, this apparently spontaneous material phenomenon—or onlookers’ perception of it—appears to have a mythical origin and significance. David Kinsley (1998, 44-6; 119) reports that the goddess Sati-Parvati has two personas: the black man-eating Kali and the fair and pretty

Gauri. This splitting occurs when Shiva taunts Parvati for her dark skin by calling her Kali. Infuriated by this insulting reference to her ‘blackness’, Parvati undertakes a series of austerities in order to obtain a golden complexion that earns her the name of Gauri, ‘the fair’. Parvati’s discarded, dark complexion or ‘sheath’ gives birth to (or becomes) Kali, the warrior goddess who is summoned to embody her wrath and, at the same time, to dissociate this fury from Parvati herself (see also O’Flaherty (1980, 93; 315) and Pattanaik (2002, 118)). Hair that is standing on end unbound, or tangled, also signifies power associated with the terrible form of *shakti*, or feminine power, personified as Kali (Kinsley 1998, 124); since unbound hair is also associated with erotic power, it must be tamed—usually either knotted or braided—except in menstruation, childbirth, sexual activity or mourning. Hem’s sudden pallor and horripilating hair seem to give corporeal expression to these pre-existing textual and cultural meanings. The already established significances of such somatic effects perhaps also shaped observers’ interpretations, so that what might otherwise be regarded as signs of her terror and distress were able to be seen as signs of her possession by the goddess in her dual form as Kali/Gauri.

While a *sati*’s interiority, her ‘inner truth’, is held to be manifested by ‘outer’ signs, these signs—horripilations, pallor, or alternate ‘paleness’ and ‘darkness’ and also bodily heat—are produced in relation to culturally contingent structures: in particular, the mythological conception of divine feminine duality. Such somatic expressions might therefore be seen as material effects of a complex interplay between cultural/textual idioms and subjective and bodily ‘experience’.

If, as Butler asserts, regulatory discourses are not ‘imposed’ upon and internalised by a pre-existing interior consciousness or a pre-existing body; rather they are ‘invisibly’ inscribed upon and incorporated ‘within’ the body to appear as “the very essence of the self, the meaning of the soul” (1990, 134), the subjective or corporeal states associated with the miraculous state of *sati*-hood need not be seen as a result of a process of internalisation by a woman who pre-exists these norms. This idea of inscription and incorporation, however, also suggests that what is represented as an essential, as an interior experience or disposition, or a ‘material positivity’ may be inseparable from its cultural elaboration.

Subjectification and *Satis*’ Agency

Butler argues that while a conception of identity as unitary, autonomous or essential tends to associate agency with the viability of a subject presumed to have a

stable existence prior to its negotiation of cultural or discursive fields, it is possible to see the subject as constructed by and in discourse, without the presumption that it is fully determined by discourse and “where determination forecloses the possibility of agency” (1990, 143). In fact, since discursive construction is a process of reiteration by which “‘subjects’ and ‘acts’ come to appear at all” (1993, 9) —but not a process initiated by a pre-existing subject—it is a precondition of agency (1990, 147). If there is no ‘self’ outside of repetitive processes of signification, and no possibility of ‘agency’ outside the discursive practices that give the term the intelligibility it has (Butler 1990, 148), a *sati* may be conceived as an agent of her ‘actions’, but not necessarily their originator, since ‘actions’ involve the performative reiteration of regulatory cultural and linguistic norms, to which she is subjected but through which she is also constituted and stabilised as a subject, and therefore also able to ‘act’ as such, to ‘produce’ herself in various relationship to those norms. Her speech and actions might be seen as effects of this double-sided process; that is, as neither wholly externally determined nor wholly initiated by the woman. The idea that a subject emerges through processes of subjectification that also involve a form of self-production might also help to explain those instances in which women apparently play an active role in constituting, or at least representing, themselves as *satis*.

This Will be My Cult: The Self-Constitution of *Sati* Om Kanwar

Several accounts suggest that during the short span of time that separates a woman’s declaration of intent and her death, she is transformed, not only for her family and her devotees, but perhaps also for herself. Some *satis* appear to take an active role in this transformative process, and in the construction of the mythologies and the cult that will surround them after their deaths. This can be illustrated by the story of Om Kanwar, a 16-year-old Rajput woman immolated in 1980 in Jharli village in the same Sikar district of the Shekhavati region where Roop died. Om’s death, like every other *sati* death, is open to widely divergent interpretations, and thus also exemplifies the difficulties involved in ‘interpreting interpretations’. My ‘story’ of this *sati* is drawn from two conflicting accounts: that of Weinberger-Thomas (1999, 117-119) who narrates it as a tale of pure volition on the part of Om; and that of Sangari and Vaid who emphasise the various pressures brought to bear upon Om by the local priest and her husband’s family, and argue that her death replays “what has become an established formula in the Shekhavati region for immolating a woman and representing it as a *sati*”

(1996, 245-249; 255). Om had made no declaration of any intention to burn herself before she joined her husband's funeral procession to the local cremation ground, wearing her bridal finery which, in some versions of the event, arose of itself out of a locked trunk (Sangari and Vaid 1996, 248). She then suddenly ordered that the cremation be performed at another site (Sangari and Vaid 1996, 246) and took a coconut and lifted it to the sky in the gesture of offering to the divinity. This gesture—"unexpected, enigmatic, but charged with funerary connotations" (Weinberger Thomas 1999, 118)—was interpreted as an unequivocal expression of her decision to die as a *sati*. Om circled the corpse four times, keeping it to her right, or pure, side which again was taken to be a sign of her wish to burn with her husband. She is then supposed to have leapt unassisted onto the four-five foot high pyre (Sangari and Vaid 1996, 248) which, despite her pressing requests, no one was willing to light (Weinberger-Thomas 1999, 119). In one story, in keeping with popular beliefs concerning the deaths of *satis*, the sun miraculously engulfed the pyre in flames (Weinberger-Thomas 1999, 119). In another, the pyre was lit with matches by a nephew (Sangari and Vaid 1996, 249).²⁰ With her last words, Om exacted that *pancami* (worship observed on the fifth day of each lunar fortnight) be made to "Sati Om Kanwar", and that she be offered only "white *pujapa*" (Weinberger-Thomas 1999, 119).²¹

The stories concerning Om's gestures and speech suggest some of the complications that arise in interpreting a *sati*'s 'performance'. A view of her speech and actions as transparent expressions of her will not only ignores any pressures that may have contributed to her 'decision', but also presumes a continuum between intentions, utterances and effects. If, as Butler argues, speech is always, to some degree, out of control or 'excitable'—and thus susceptible to processes of re-signification—pre-existing or interested cultural and religious meanings may easily be attached to a *sati*'s speech. Her gestures, especially such ambivalent gestures as Om's lifting a coconut to the sky, are also susceptible to interested reinterpretation. Moreover, when a *sati* like Om seems to prescribe the form her worship should take, her speech is easily resignified to suggest she actively seeks deification; this makes her the 'voice' of sanction for both her death and the temple cult that will form around it. Yet if the story about Om exacting white *pujapa* is true, it also suggests that in the hours before her death Om took an active part in the play of her metamorphosis. She displayed, and perhaps even saw, herself as a woman transformed and, perhaps able to imagine herself as already dead, presented herself as an object of worship.²²

The idea of self-production as an interplay between discursive norms and active processes of self-fashioning—or “technologies of the self”—might help to explain the active role played by a woman like Om in the construction of her identity as a *sati* and of her own myth and cult. This self-construction seems to involve both drawing upon pre-existing symbols and adopting—sometimes adapting—what might be called a ‘pre-existing *sati* persona’. As argued above, a *sati*’s speech seems to rehearse conventional utterances. Certain ritual actions, such as the raising of hands in benediction, distributing jewellery and *prasad*, or circling a pyre, also suggest that women imitate the conventional attitudes of *satis* in their gestures. Even when, like Om, they ‘invent’ new variations, these stylised gestures and apparently idiosyncratic utterances are still derived from the ambient culture. A woman’s reproduction and adaptation of conventional gestures might therefore be interpreted as, simultaneously, her investment in a pre-constructed ‘subject position’ and part of an active process of self-constitution and self-representation. Such a process may be a part of what enables a woman who has declared herself a *sati* to carry through on her vow. This by no means constitutes evidence that her death was a product of her untrammelled agency in any uncomplicated sense.

Moreover, if agency emerges as subjectivity emerges, and if subjectivity is an effect of processes of identification and subjectification—the constitution of the self in relation to various discursive formations—a *sati*’s agency may be seen neither as completely constructed, nor as a sign of complete autonomy. Although assertions of a *sati*’s exercise of agency would seem to exonerate those around her, the woman’s agency need not be completely denied in order that other agents or forms of agency be implicated in her death.

Seeing and Believing: from *Darshan* to Iconography, from Commodification to Subjectification

I have argued that what Butler calls the possibility of perilous appropriation enables *sati* to be represented as an heroic, voluntary and divine self-sacrifice. This possibility also enables faith in *sati* to be strengthened and widened by a resignification and attachment of existing symbolic structures and the creation of new ones and—as the cults of recent *satis* like Roop and Om suggest—to be freshly constituted by instances of *sati*, especially as they become institutionalised and spectacularly commodified. While

the commodification of *sati* deaths serves obviously political and economic interests, commodification might also play a role in the sacrificial calling of future *satis*.

As Sangari and Vaid (1996) show, a hallmark of contemporary *sati* cults appears to be a capacity both to draw in and extend outward into a wide range of traditional and popular cultural and religious forms. These cults overlap with, and also resignify the meanings of, a range of traditional and popular practices: the worship of goddesses such as Sati-Parvati and Sita; ascetic and renunciatory traditions; life-cycle rituals, especially those structured around preserving women's marital status and fertility; traditional marriage songs; and recent cults formed around the goddess heroines of films.²³ The 'popular' nature of *sati* cults and the stress on collective *darshan*²⁴ and homage—of the *sati* herself and later of the trappings of her cult—suggest that 'personal' belief in *sati* is mediated through resignifying structures that not only reflect, but also solicit, faith.



Stele carved as a memorial to a 17th century *sati*, photographed with permission from Madras Museum, Tamil Nadu, in 2002.

If subjectivity is conceived as an effect of processes of identification and subjectification—the constitution of the self in and through various discursive formations—the commodifying accoutrements of *sati* cults may produce both identifications and subjective affects. As Sangari and Vaid argue, devotional hymns and chants in praise of *satis*, symbolic or iconographic images, elaborations produced around the site, shrines and temples, stele and stones, hagiographical pamphlets, commemorations and celebrations, rallies in defence of *sati*, fundraising campaigns, and the sale of relics and other sacred items all insert themselves between the “external

world” and apparently spontaneous experience (1996, 244). To the extent that structures of signification have the power to produce subjectifying effects, these vestiges of the sacrifice might not only help to elicit general faith in *sati*, but also represent a kind of identificatory call to ‘new’ *satis*.²⁵ At least some part of the power of these iconographic, verbal and material structures to produce identifications lies in the fact that they never reveal any sign of violence, or of a woman’s fear, struggle, resistance or pain. Indeed, what distinguishes representations of *sati* from the representation of other forms of violence against women (dowry deaths, for instance) is their focus upon the instant deification of the woman and the utopian dimensions of her self-sacrifice, which means that such representations can draw upon a broader well-spring of religious and cultural feeling. This in turn helps the images and discourses organised around the glorification of *sati* to produce their sometimes-fatal subjectifying effects.

The Indian women who protested against the Deorala *sati* and called for legal intervention in both the practice and its glorification generally did so on the grounds that *sati* is a crime of violence against women. As argued earlier, however, when anti-*sati* legislation was passed in the wake of Roop’s death, women protesters were confronted with a legal discourse that represented the *sati* as an agent exercising unconstrained choice by treating *sati* as suicide and therefore as a criminal offence on the part of the woman, who was seen to be merely ‘abetted’ by those around her. At the same time, advocates of *sati* sought to discredit the arguments of Indian women protestors on the grounds that, since *sati* is both traditional and religious, those women who argue against it were Westernised feminists, and therefore unqualified to criticise ‘traditional’ practices or ‘represent’ ‘true’ Hindu womanhood (an argument that works to erase a history of Indian women’s resistance to both local and imperialist patriarchies, a history that also forms an effective counter-narrative to an imperialist story of victimisation and rescue). Coupled with the hostility expressed towards Indian women who protest against *sati* and support for *sati* among Hindu nationalist women—and their ability to appropriate a ‘feminist’ language of rights²⁶—the problematics of the new legislation and the state’s inability (or unwillingness) to properly enforce it suggests the limitations inherent in seeking to repudiate *sati* through a language of equal constitutional rights, and through recourse to legislative interventions that invest a *sati* with an agency equal to that of those around her.

I would argue, however, that the idea of *satis*’ identity and agency as that which emerges from the performative constitution of the female subject provides several

grounds for feminist intervention. Firstly, such a conceptualisation enables the glorification of *sati* to be contested on the grounds that it is predicated upon essentialist constructions of gender, caste, or communal identity, rather than on either moral grounds or on the grounds that a *sati* is a passive victim of patriarchal or nationalist manipulations. Secondly, as I have tried to show, it provides a way of tracing the complex transactions between the discursive norms that underpin *sati* and the processes through which a woman might be constituted, and even actively constitute herself, as a *sati*. As such, it displaces the binaries of coercion and self-will, violence and volition, victimisation and agency that structure both pro- and anti-*sati* discourses.

Sangari and Vaid argue that any theory of female subjectivity that attempts to reify female volition by representing the violence of *sati* either as a product of the woman's agency or as something other than violence, reinforces the "ideological formations that structure the practice of widow immolation" by suppressing the "materiality of the event and the processes that inform" it (1996, 243). In one sense, it is impossible to represent *sati* as anything other than an instance of patriarchal violence—as material violence against one woman and symbolic violence against all women—without reproducing the ideologies that structure immolations. That this violence may be, sometimes or in part, consented to—that it may even be represented as self-inflicted—does not make it other than violence. Yet, in the absence of 'actual' coercion, all *satis*' subjectivities and actions cannot be reduced to their simply yielding to the desires and machinations of others.²⁷ This might suggest that agency exercised and violence inflicted are not mutually exclusive.

The concept of performativity presents feminist activists with the possibility of considering female subjectivity and agency in *sati* without either reifying women's volition or denying violence, since it provides a way of theorising the co-existence of violence and agency and of locating this co-existence within issues of gender and social hierarchy. The broad, though nuanced, differences in various women's positions on *sati*²⁸ signal that women's positions, perspectives, or evaluations of the 'meanings' of *sati* cannot be invariably predicted on the grounds of their geographical, social or cultural locations. This 'unpredictability' also suggests that relations between various women, between women and various feminisms, and between these and questions of representation are more complex than any idea of identity as fixed by pre-determined categories might allow. By foregrounding the ways discursive processes shape both social structures and personal subjectivities, and the agency that emerges from the

constitution of subjectivity, the idea of performativity suggests that agency need not be equated with autonomy or victimisation with helplessness. That is, it makes it possible to theorise an active subject position for *satis* even as it presents grounds for resisting both the violence of *sati* itself and of the discursive norms and social structures that underpin it. This means that even when a woman's volition is sought to be demonstrated by pro-*sati* groups, the rite and its glorification—and the inadequacy of the state's responses to both—may still be the subject of feminist critique and protest.

A conceptualisation of the state of *sati*-hood as an effect of a performative reiteration of symbolic norms organised around pre-existing concepts such as *pativratiya* and *sat*, *bhava* and *samskaras*, *karma* and transmigration, and reinforced by the glorification and commodification of *sati* deaths, works to counter the idea that her death is the expression of a *sati*'s inherent identity or untrammelled agency. Indeed, it suggests that the identity and agency of the woman-as-*sati* are *constituted* by the very effects—the pronouncement of the *sativrat*, the 'performance' of certain ritualised gestures, the manifestation of the corporeal signifiers of *sat*, the capacity to perform miracles—that are presented in pro-*sati* discourse as resulting from this identity and agency. Such a suggestion presents a ground for contesting any proposition that *satis* spontaneously choose and orchestrate their own deaths, and means feminist activists do not have to prove that the woman did not give any indication of volition (signs of which *sati* sympathers seek to demonstrate and emphasise) in order to argue that she was not merely 'abetted' by those around her. That is, it makes it possible to identify *satis* as active subjects exercising agency but also to assert that this subjectivity and agency are shaped and expressed in the context of a complex interplay of violent discursive and social structures of which they control neither the production nor the direct or indirect effects.

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NOTES

¹ There have been occasional instances of *sati* since; Roop's death was particularly significant in terms of igniting controversy and resulting in legislative intervention. For more detailed accounts and discussion of the Deorala sati, see the essays collected in Hawley (1994), Kishwar and Vanita (1987), Kumar (1999) and Narasimhan (1998).

² The Sanscrit term *sati* properly refers to a virtuous woman, and thus by to the woman who demonstrates her virtue by burning herself with her husband, but is used by most writers – Hindu and non-Hindu – to refer also to the act and concept.

³ Literature on *sati* and its various permutations up to the colonial period indicates that far from being a 'timeless' Hindu cultural tradition, *sati* was an 'invented tradition' continuously modified and reinvented in response to contemporary circumstances. It was prevalent only in certain areas, among particular groups and at specific historical junctures. Both fluctuations in its incidence and variations in its regional and caste constituencies were shaped by various social, economic and political factors such as internal and external conquests, and changing systems of kinship and inheritance.

⁴ The positions of both Britons and Hindus were more complex than this suggests. *Sati* has always been contentious within Hinduism, as suggested by even the earliest Sanscrit texts, with support from some, condemnation from others. 19th century Hindus were loosely divided between a cultural identity that – then as now – imagined itself through defence of the *sati*'s freely chosen, traditional right to die, and one (represented most forcefully by Rammohan Roy) that saw the abolition of *sati* as part of the reform of women's status, which was in turn a necessary component of modernisation. The British

position, roughly organised by a conception that the protection of women was integral to the imperialist mission, was complicated by British policies of non-interference in religious practice and, in some cases, by British admiration of the *sati*'s conjugal devotion and courage. Nevertheless, *sati*'s prohibition (in 1829, when the colonial state, under the direction of Governor General Lord William Bentinck, made *sati* illegal in areas under British control and participation in its performance an act of culpable homicide) was generally construed as both saving Indian women and 'civilising' Indian society. For more detailed discussion of the colonial debate see Mani (1990; 1998); also Nair (2000), some of the essays collected in Sangari and Vaid (1990) and in Sharma et al (1998).

⁵ Among them are Jain (1987), Kishwar and Vanita (1987), Narasimhan (1998), Gandhi and Shah (1991), Oldenberg (1994), Sangari and Vaid (1996), Kumar (1998), Vaid (1988), Nair (2000) and Sen (2001).

⁶ Shakuntala Narasimhan writes that up to 300,000 people—including members of the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly—arrived at the *sati-sthal* for what was “promoted as a religious family observance” (1998, 222). William Dalrymple claims the number of worshippers at the *sati sthal* up to and including the day of the *chunari mahotsav* was close to 750,000 (1999, 126).

⁷ The *Rajasthan Sati (Prevention) Ordinance* was promulgated in October 1987, and the *Rajasthan Sati (Prevention) Act* in November 1987. This was followed by national legislation, the *Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987*, which came into effect early the next year. My discussion of the legislation is based on appendices in Narasimhan (1988, 272-281; 282-294).

⁸ Women's groups also objected that the legislation was formulated with little or no consultation with women (Nair 2000, 24). Women's organisations conjointly drafted an alternative *Sati* Prevention Bill that sought to broaden the issue by legislating against all crimes perpetrated against women in the name of religion or custom—including *sati*, polygamy, purdah, witch-hunting and the practice of dedicating girls to temples—but its provisions were “not taken up seriously” (Nair 2000, 241; see also Kumar 1998. 180).

⁹ This brief description of what is believed to be the transformative trajectory of a *sati*, is constructed from a range of accounts, including that of Harlan (1994), Hawley (1994), Sangari and Vaid (1996) and Weinberger-Thomas (1999).

¹⁰ This vow removes any doubt that the woman is a *pativrata*, a wife whose fulfilment of vows (*vrata*) of devotion is meant to protect her husband (*pati*) from death. While widowhood is sometimes referred to as “cold *sati*” (Yang 1989, 93), a woman who does not burn herself with her husband is literally *asati*, without *sat*: without virtue or truth. Since a woman’s sin or lack of wifely devotion, in this or previous lives, is held to have propelled her husband into death, widowhood is viewed as essentially self-inflicted, and as inauspicious; both to the woman herself and to others.

¹¹ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993) provides a fascinating analysis of the subject-constitutive dimensions of a *sati*’s pain.

¹² Sangari and Vaid argue that assertions of failed attempts to dissuade a woman constitute her as a voice for the “patriarchal values that seem to emanate from her” (1996, 255).

¹³ For extended discussion of the blessings, curses and ritual and other prohibitions that may be issued by *satis*, see especially Harlan (1994); and also Courtright (1994, 40-41) and Weinberger-Thomas (1999, 105).

¹⁴ Women of the family, therefore, are obliged to forswear certain items, colours or practices associated with sexuality, marriage and maternity. Harlan argues that, paradoxically, by giving up the auspicious, women gain in auspiciousness, since worshipping a *sati* and observing her *ok* brings the woman and her household under the protection of the *satimata* who is the paradigm of auspiciousness (1994, 89).

¹⁵ It seems that a *sati*’s *ok* may also bring material benefit to her family-in-law. Mala Sen reports that, when she asked Roop Kanwar’s father-in-law, Sumer Singh, what would happen to Roop’s dowry, he told her it was Roop’s *ok* that everything she had brought to the house should go to his own daughter (2001, 264). While an *ok* traditionally involves some form of material denial rather than gain, in this case it provided Sumer Singh with his daughter’s dowry.

¹⁶ A woman’s earlier displays of religiosity or fascination for fire are often considered portentous once she has become a *sati*. Roop’s father, Bal Singh Rathor, told Elisabeth Bumiller that his daughter was “very religious” but also that “no-one could have imagined this” (1990, 67).

¹⁷ While miracles function as ‘evidence’ of the presence of *sat*, it is difficult to ascertain which comes first, especially since miracles and *sat* appear to be mutually reinforcing. Sangari and Vaid argue that *sat* is “manufactured and gains consent partly because it

first elides human participation, then benevolently re-inducts the participants who can express the pride of participation without feeling the guilt of collusion” (1996, 289) and that miracles actually structure the event around its illegality (1996, 256). This is perhaps particularly the case in the miracle of the ‘self-lighting’ pyre, ignited by divine intervention or by the woman’s *sat* often at the precise moment someone was about to light it.

¹⁸ Meena, a personal friend, comes from a Gujerati Brahmin family and has lived in Tamil Nadu for most of her life.

¹⁹ These words are a definition of the concept of *samskara* given to me in personal discussion with Nithya, a Brahmin woman from Madurai, Tamil Nadu, in 2002. Weinberger-Thomas argues: “It is her flawless conduct through cycles of past births as well as her ever pure and well-oriented “dispositions” that have, through the germination and accumulation of “psychic residues” (*purvasamskaras*), produced that which forms both the nature and the power of the *sati*, her *sat*” (1999, 45).

²⁰ Police arrested six people for abetting Om’s ‘suicide’, but the case was dropped for lack of witnesses (Sangari and Vaid 1996, 246).

²¹ *Puja* is the adoration of divinities or divine images in a temple or domestic shrine, and *pujapa* is the range of ingredients used in *puja*.

²² R. Hartley Kennedy’s account of the 1825 *sati* of Ambabai (“The Suttee: The Narrative of an Eyewitness”, 1843, 242-256, partly reproduced in Courtright, 1994, 43-46) reveals the way a *sati* is believed, and perhaps believes herself, to be transformed in the moment of life-renunciation. Ambabai distributed baskets of coconut, sugar and dates among the onlookers who appeared to see her as “a goddess, capable of conferring blessings and warding off future evils” (Kennedy 1843, 245, cited in Courtright, 1994, 45). Kennedy’s description of the transactions between Ambabai and her devotees suggests that she also shared the belief that she was a divinity: as her worshippers fell to their knees before her as she pressed red powder to their brows, Ambabai demonstrated a “loftiness of manner ... gracefulness of speech and action ... a demeanour called forth by carelessness to earth and earthly things, to which she had mentally said her last farewell, and arising out of the heavenly aspirations or glowing enthusiasm of her mind” (Kennedy 1843, 244, cited in Courtright, 1994, 45).

²³ One example is the cult formed around a previously little known goddess, Santoshi Ma, after the release of a film about her (Lutgendorf 2002a, 10-16; Lutgendorf 2002b 24-37).

²⁴ *Darshan*, the reciprocal act of visual communication that is central to *sati* worship—and Hindu worship in general—is one reason people are eager to witness a *sati*.

²⁵ Sangari and Vaid argue that the construction of *sati* Narayani's temple at Jhunjhunhu in the 1950s provided a locus for political and ideological mobilisation that explains, at least in part, the sudden resurgence of immolations in that area (1996, 245).

²⁶ In *sati*, as in other contexts, resignifications are always vulnerable to what Butler calls "perilous expropriation" (1997, 87). The implications of this possibility are suggested by Kumar's account of the way women pro-*sati* demonstrators, in Delhi in 1983, took up the feminist cry: "we, the women of India, are not flowers but fiery sparks". While feminists had used these words to resignify female identity, the "feminists who attended that demonstration experienced ... the humiliating sense of loss which accompanies the discovery that your own words can so readily be snatched and turned against you to serve an antithetical cause" (Kumar 1998:174). Such a redeployment of the language of feminist resistance in the service of hegemonic norms seems to point to the necessity of an ongoing resignification, a constant re-destabilisation and re-reinvention of modes of representation; what Butler calls an "aggressive re-appropriation" (1997, 93). A powerful and strategically complex instance of such de-stabilisation is Manjula Padmanabhan's short story "Hot Death, Cold Soup" (1989) which resignifies *sati* in ways that subvert the political and subjective meanings ascribed to it by both its proponents and its colonial critics.

²⁷ In the same way, other women's subjective belief in the power and divinity of *satis* cannot be simply reduced to their 'parroting' of sentiments imbibed from a patriarchal culture.

²⁸ For instance those between Weinberger-Thomas' and Sangari and Vaid's arguments on the violence of *sati* and the possibility of a woman's consent; and the differences between these and some *Hindutva* women's certainty that all *satis* are voluntary; and the equal certainty of Hindu women anti-*sati* protestors that no *sati* is voluntary; and between each of these and Sunder Rajan's reconstruction of the subjectivity of the *sati* on the premise of the pain of the body that burns.