



Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 1993. Pp. x, 153. \$12.99 pb.

Rajeswari Rajan's thorough study of gender, culture, and postcolonialism is refracted through cultural representations of inter-related contentious traditions in Indian culture: *sati* (the self-immolation of Hindu widows), husband worship, bride-burning, and dowry deaths. Her examination of particular texts and films is situated within a carefully articulated intervention in current feminist postcolonial debates about female subjectivity, the invention of tradition in a minority culture, and ways of reading resistance and agency in women's texts or the social text at large. She suggests that postcolonial cultures share some common features: feminist negotiations with the postcolonial state, inequalities in social structures, the pull of nationalism and regionalism, and the conflict of tradition and modernity. At the same time, postcolonial identities are heterogeneous, and by now the arguments against essential indigenous identities and the re-annexation of colonial subjects by theory are familiar. She draws on selected texts and films to show that representation has its own political reality and effects, that culture itself is coercive and contested, and that subjectivities are constantly reinscribed in the cultural realm.

These topics are difficult to treat without sensationalism and ethical imperatives. They seem to invite an invocation of "the real" pain of women as opposed to the discursive constructions of female subjectivity, so this study is extremely timely and informative, while being attentive to the "social debasement" (49) and the various religious and cultural traditions that underpin *sati* and related practices. *Sati* is situated within other critical studies on rape in literature (such as Terry Eagleton's study of *Clarissa*), Elaine Scarry's work on discourses of pain, colonial law, popular culture, subaltern studies, and iconography. Readings of literary and filmic examples substantiate gender predicaments as being more than victimhood, and as located within broader political structures.

Sati invites this kind of debate, with its problematic attribution of motive, so-called voluntary immolation, and lack of testimony. There seems to be a complex meshing of forms of subordination and ritual in *sati* and related practices. The topic itself seems to be difficult to pull out of its many hiding-places in cultural reticence, psychological compensations, excuses, and ambiguity. It is disturbing that although *sati* was officially "abolished" in 1829 (49), there were 4,386 "wife-murders" in 1990 (93). Between these two statistics lies a complexly intertwined rope of cultural pressure, habituated practice, and self-serving male action.

Despite Rajan's precise readings of her chosen texts, I would have liked to have heard more on the materiality of the practice: she men-

tions widows and women, husbands, and relatives. When is death by burning caused by circumstances other than widowhood? What are the preceding and accompanying rites exactly? What role is played by economic pressures, as a key modern example involves the suicides of daughters who know they will be without dowries. What caused the zeal for husband worship in the first place? It is good to know that Indian women can shorten the lives of their husbands simply by uttering his name, and that nevertheless some of them only utter his name at the moment of their deaths, but the original sanctions for such extreme forms of subordination seem to need airing.

It comes as a relief to read that the staging of the "cultural unconscious" (84)—a useful phrase—in popular film often involves elaborate acts of revenge against husbands with such powers, and abuses of power. The exaggerated fantasies described correspond in their enormity with the exaggeration of husbands' rights. However, Rajan is surely correct in not stressing cultural differences and relativism but pursuing detailed historical textual study, because it is too easy to see *sati* and dowry deaths as the excesses arising from religious tradition or otherness from Western practice. It is the continuity with Western tradition that needs feminist underlining, both in historical and fictional narratives. What may need further investigation is the way in which Indian imbrication in a global economy, Western habits of intervention, development and aid, and the divide between rural and urban women may have encouraged practices that replicate or imitate *sati*. Examples are not lacking in this study.

Rajan also extends earlier discussion of speech and silence by adding the concept of "action," a third term that has philosophical and political implications. This adds complexity to earlier feminist assumptions that the main, and perhaps only task for feminist critics was to give women access to public terrains, to rescue women's texts and voices from historical oblivion. This discussion problematizes a number of aspects of the relationship between gender and subjectivity, private and public domains, individuality and collectivity. The state is also a site of conflict, though more so in some postcolonial countries than others, and such discussions help to keep alive the contestatory nature of feminism as well as a broader democratic process. However, it seems to be action that is the missing term for women subjected to *sati*, if "subjected" is the word. How do we measure the subjective force of centuries of cultural practice? *Sati* seems to be taken up in iconography, and the iconography figures repression, ambiguity, and cultural hybridity. It also figures a complex relationship between pleasure and pain that needs further questioning in relation to the cultural continuation of women ownership in Indian culture. Economic contexts do not simply replace religious motivation, but they seem to overdetermine forms of continuation of *sati* in the modern world, and their self-justification.

Rajan's chapter on Indira Gandhi extends the debate of public power and private realms, contesting simplistic readings of women political leaders as surrogate males or icons of motherhood, or the idea of separate feminine traits as the necessary basis of democratic ideals. Gendered explanations of political authority are questioned, and some of the paradoxical relationship between Gandhi as Mother India and her declaration of emergency conditions are highlighted. The discussion of allegories of power, women under emergency conditions, and rural village infrastructures and communities versus the pluralism of modern democracy invites some comparison with African structures and conditions. Rajan's study generally highlights areas of intervention in complex feminist and postcolonial debates, and offers detailed readings of texts as well as lucid summations of problematic areas in outlining a cultural construction of female subjectivity that allows for contestation and agency. The general direction of her thesis moves towards a sense of women as "conflicted subjects and sites of conflict" (135). The general direction of the photographs and historical occurrences cited moves towards a sense of Indian wives as the passive objects of their husbands' and society's volition. This contradiction may be an example of one of the problems she opens her discussion with: is subversion located within reading or writing practice? Iconography moves us towards a static contemplation, an aesthetic response. Politics, the non-essential essence of feminism, seems to require more than contemplation.

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A *Globe and Mail* article, August 27, 1998, reports the discovery of several missing pages of Anne Frank's diary. The subtitle of the article quickly moves from the "sadness" of the excerpts to the real news, that is, the possible violation of copyright. For the article observes that the Anne Frank Fund has called in its lawyers to examine this apparent violation. In turn, the Amsterdam daily *Het Parool*, which published the excerpts on its front page, responds that their lawyers are ready and waiting. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is, as it has been for much of its his-