

A Mutiny of Silence: Swarnakumari Devi's Sati Teresa Hubel

The historical context that helped to produce the writing of Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal also gives us a glimmer into some of the possible reasons why her work faded from the literary memory of nationalist India.¹ Some of that context is hinted at in the back pages of her collection of short stories in English, published in 1919 by Ganesh and Co., Madras. Reminding us of the inescapable connection between capitalism and knowledge, these back pages are dedicated to an advertisement of Ganesh and Co.'s other recently published texts. Grouped under the heading "Indian National Literature," their titles and descriptions are telling: *The Indian Nation Builders*, a series of biographies of "thirty-six eminent Indians"; *India for Indians*, which contains speeches delivered by C. R. Das on the subject of Home Rule; *How India Can Save the Empire*, another compilation of speeches, these by the members of the Indian Home Rule Deputation and other unnamed leaders, who, Indian readers are promised, will explicate "the Present Situation and the future work before us" (3); *Is India Civilized?: Essays on Indian Culture* by Sir John Woodroffe; and almost in answer to that titanicly insulting question, *Art and Swadeshi* by Dr. A. K. Coomaraswamy. That same list of Indian National Literature announces the arrival on the political and literary scene of Swarnakumari Devi's unpretentiously entitled *Short Stories*.

Unlike the historical indeterminacy of Swarnakumari Devi's modest title, the names of these other texts date them much more precisely. This is the early twentieth century in British imperial India, the second decade of that century, in fact, a time when the givenness of the empire—with its pretensions to being the definer of what was or was not "civilized"—was clashing with a relatively new nationalist ideology that had not quite yet found one dominant way. It was the age of Home Rule, of Swadeshi, of Hindu revivalism, violence in Bengal, and the temporary break-up

of the National Congress; it was the after-Tilak-and-before-Gandhi moment in Indian history, in short, a liminal age, which might have gone in any one of a number of directions. What I will argue in this essay is that Swarnakumari Devi's almost forgotten collection of short stories in English, and particularly the last story, "Mutiny," not only manifests the restlessness and indecisiveness of that era but contributed to the creation of the next—the Gandhian one. In so doing, I aim to be part of a still exclusive but growingly public conversation about this neglected author whose family connections as much as her sex got in the way of her posterity.

To get some sense of Swarnakumari Devi's place in that liminal time, I must quote a few sentences from the back-page advertisement that follows the announcement of her new title. Ganesh and Co., Madras called on the *Aberdeen Press* to approve her writing, and this is what some unidentified Scot apparently had to say about her and her *Short Stories*:

Mrs. Ghosal is a sister of Rabindranath Tagore, to whom the noble Prize (sic) was recently awarded. If the Poet's merits are great, those of his sister are scarcely less, and both East and West will agree that it [the collection] is a charming revelation of the workings of a woman's heart. In its sweet simplicity and delicacy of tough (sic), faded readers will experience a new sensation. ("Indian National Literature" 1)

The reviewer from the *Aberdeen Press* shows all the signs of also being a product of his time. This was an unashamedly imperial, unabashedly masculine time, when an Indian woman's fiction could be so readily disarmed by unthreatening adjectives like "charming" and "sweet" and when it was assumed that the principal thing at work when a woman sat down to write was her heart. It was too a time that produced the ad nauseam reiteration of the names of a few famous men. There is no escaping these few famous men, it seems, even in a blurb and especially if one of them is your brother. So, what in only three sentences does the reviewer manage to convey about Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal? That she is not quite white, not quite male, and not quite Rabindranath Tagore.

However, those *nots* are the very things I particularly appreciate about Swarnakumari Devi and her fiction. Here was a woman writing first in Bengali and later in English in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a woman who contributed some of her own autobiographical moments as well as many more imaginative constructions to the discourse about Indian women, which was so central to the causes of nationalism, imperialism, and social reform in India. A list of her published output includes novels, stories, poems, essays, plays, and even the first opera in Bengali.² A nationalist herself, she also participated in the first Swadeshi movement and was a member of the Indian National Congress. She was an avid activist on behalf of other women. In 1886 she founded *Sakhi Samiti*, an organization dedicated to promoting friendship between women and to providing education and shelter for Hindu girls. She served for years as the first female editor of *Bharati*, a literary magazine which provided a place for Bengali writers to articulate their grievances with the frequently cooperative systems of British imperialism and Indian patriarchy and to celebrate their own literature. In their introduction to her work in the first volume of *Women Writing in India*, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita make the claim that “During her lifetime Swarnakumari’s novels were as popular as those of the great novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee,” but lament in this 2002 edition of their two-volume collection, “Yet today it is difficult to lay one’s hands on the writings of this versatile artist” (235–236). To highlight the absurdity of the difference between her descent into almost oblivion and her brother’s ascent into something like literary godhood in India, they add that “A whole publishing house was set up to preserve and reprint the works of her famous brother, Rabindranath” (236). There’s just something ridiculous about the historical imperatives that would create such an enormous discrepancy.

In the 5 July 1932 issue of *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, just days after her death, Swarnakumari Devi was remembered as “one of the most outstanding Bengali women of the age” who “did her best for the amelioration of the condition of the womanhood of Bengal” (3). She must have been unambitious or humble, or else she was supremely motivated because she carried out her life’s work, which was both politi-

cal and literary, during a historical period when the fact of her gender combined with her race would inevitably function to marginalize that work. Even her brother had a hand in that marginalization: after the 1914 publication of her first novel in English (it is known as *Kahake* in its original Bengali while the English title is *An Unfinished Song*), he sent an English friend the following colossally condescending description of his older sister: “She is one of those unfortunate beings who has more ambition than ability. But just enough talent to keep her alive for a short period. Her weakness has been taken advantage of by some unscrupulous literary agents in London and she has had stories translated and published. I have given her no encouragement but have not been successful in making her see things in the proper light” (238). In the introduction to their 2004 translation and republication of her novel *Snehalata ba Palita (The Uprooted Vine)*, Rajul Sogani and Indira Gupta argue that Swarnakumari Devi’s take on the perennially popular figure of the Indian widow was far more progressive than that of her famous father, Debendranath Thakur, who was not at all in favour of the remarriage of high caste Hindu widows, as well as of her even more famous brother, who chose a fate for the widow character in his later novel *Chokher Bali* that cast her into a conservative obscurity, a spiritual withdrawal that conveniently left the political ground to the men. Contrary to this careful choice, according to Sogani and Gupta, “Swarnakumari Devi’s answer to the problems of women like Snehalata is not remarriage, but more education and financial independence” (xiii), a stance which had much more in common with the one that Indian feminists took up in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s in regards to widows and women generally.³ She has the widow protagonist of her *The Uprooted Vine* commit suicide to make a point about the untenability of their situation and the injustice of their lot in colonial India.

Today Swarnakumari Devi’s name is rarely, if ever, mentioned in nationalist histories and even in feminist histories she usually occupies a secondary position, behind her daughter Sarala Devi.⁴ And, as the few literary scholars who have written about her have observed, it is difficult to find any of her English novels or short stories in India or in the West,

although it is to be hoped that more translations and republications will follow Sogani and Gupta's welcome efforts.

To round out this portrait of Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal, I should add that her biases, at least when they are expressed in her fiction, tend to be decidedly Hindu and upper middle-class. This is the world into which she invites what she assumes are the "Western" readers of her short stories, though she asserts, in a protective gesture against any Orientalist tendency to co-opt her knowledge, that giving Westerners access to the domestic and social life of the Hindu does not guarantee that they will be able to understand it: "even if they were admitted within that pale," she writes in her Preface, "they would only with very great difficulty find it possible to identify themselves with us, for the Hindu is born not made" (i). She nevertheless allows these outsiders to glimpse this world she claims as her own because her purpose is to enable them "to enter in some small measure into the true spirit of our national character" (iii). For Swarnakumari Devi, India's national character is invariably Hindu. Muslims usually emerge in the other short stories in the collection as outsiders and interlopers.

This is not the first time that she has attempted to construct in English fiction a national character for India. Two previous novels in English, *An Unfinished Song* (1913) and *The Fatal Garland* (1914), are both concerned with the same issue, specifically as it relates to the upper caste women of India. *Short Stories* is similar to the two novels in its focus on the Hindu India experienced by these women, but the collection ends with a tale—which she entitles "Mutiny (A True Story)"—that is not so easily categorized. It is so much less sure of itself than her other English writing and so much angrier and even at moments despairing. Profoundly ironic, "Mutiny" exposes the irrationality at the heart of imperialist versions of truth and the difficulty of speaking back to its twisted and contradictory logic; even at a structural level—with its broken narrative, its silences, and its unexplicated tale-within-a-tale—the story testifies to the destructive results of this irrationality.⁵ Swarnakumari Devi calls up one incarnation of the Indian national character after another—first the sati, then the kshatriya warrior, and finally the valiant Indian sepoy, who, even as she writes, is fighting on

England's side in the First World War. But none of these seem sufficient in the face of overwhelming British control of the discourse about the Indian national character. It is ultimately the half sad, half funny revelation of British fear that undermines the rulers' authority and allows the narrator, who is probably Swarnakumari Devi herself, to close on a note of tellingly misplaced triumph. We are left in the end wondering what constitutes 'mutiny', what politics lie behind the naming of something as a mutiny, and who, finally, is the story's mutineer: the warrior, the sati, or the narrator.

Since it is likely that few readers today will have read "Mutiny," because *Short Stories* has yet to be republished, I will briefly outline the plot. For the purposes of this story, the narrator steps out from behind the veil of fiction and declares that the conversation she is about to recount actually occurred while she and her son were attending a dinner party at the home of a British official and his wife in the Bombay Presidency. The tale begins with the men lingering over their wine inside the bungalow while their women chat outside on the verandah. First the setting; it is night and the verandah overlooks an ocean heaving under the moon. The narrator notices two pillars dedicated to sati on the shore nearby. Off to the west are the ruins of the island forts of Andhari and Kandari, where the eighteenth-century Maratha warrior Kanhoji Angray is said to have imprisoned his captives.

With such reminders of past violence before them, the women begin to talk about the "great war that is now convulsing the world," and the narrator spends the next three pages lamenting the colonized condition of her people, which prevents her from being able to join in the patriotic boasting about "national courage" (228). She turns the conversation back to the sati pillars, a move which prompts one of the English women to declare sati a "terrible custom" (231). This response once again leads the narrator back inside herself, where she wonders about her feelings of inadequacy in the face of a predictable British reaction to her denigrated Hindu culture. A misconception by one of the more recent arrivals from England eventually turns the conversation to the subject of the 1857 mutiny, a shift that allows the hostess, Mrs. A, to recount a tale about her own experience of a mutiny in India.

This is the story within the story. Mrs. A had just come out to India with her husband, who was an Assistant Collector in Sukkar. Although she usually accompanied him when he went on tour, she had decided this one time to stay home. The local Superintendent of Police offered to station a guard of his sepoy outside her house while her husband was away, but she refused to accept the favour because she trusted her own sepoy and servants to protect her. In the middle of the night, however, she was awakened by the sounds of human cries and gun shots. She became certain that another Mutiny was occurring in her own back yard and that she would be its helpless victim. Because she did not know the local language well, she was unable to communicate with her ayah. Indeed, her efforts to do so only convinced her that her first suspicion was correct. In desperate fear, Mrs. A fainted. The next morning she learned her mistake.

What she had heard in the darkness was not another mutiny but the result of a tangled love affair. Her ayah was the object of two men's affections, one of whom was a member of the sepoy regiment that guarded her bungalow and the other a police sepoy. The two men met in Mrs. A's back yard and fought out their rivalry while she panicked inside. Contrary to her earlier presumption that she was the focus of the night's activities, it was, in fact, her ayah who held centre stage. When her husband returned home after his tour, she was ashamed to tell him how she had over-reacted.

After the "mutiny" narrative ends, the men join the women on the verandah with the news that a cable has just arrived announcing the landing of the Indian troops in Europe. The host praises the Indian sepoy for their valour and loyalty, and the narrator briefly describes the Indian soldiers' subsequent acts of bravery in battle. The narrator brings the story to a close with the expression of a hope that when the war is over, the British government will reward India's sacrifice by ceding to "her just demands" (239).

The theme that ties the images and the events in the story together involves this idea of national courage. Swarnakumari Devi tries to locate the heroes and heroines of Indian history and culture in order to find a way to speak back to the superior assumptions of the empire, voiced

here by various memsahibs. She evokes first the feminine image of the sati, then the masculine Maratha warrior and Indian sepoy. She feels the need to do this, to recover and glorify these figures, because, as the story makes clear, not only have the traditionally “masculine” virtues of daring, valour, and fortitude been entirely appropriated by the British rulers in India but Indians’ capacity for self-definition has been seriously undermined by their continued presence and by the imperialism these white rulers propagate. In the course of her brief panegyric to Kanhoji Angray, near the beginning of the story, she confronts these consequences of colonialism. She writes,

Europeans called him “pirate,” and such in truth he was; but in the days when might was right, what chief, or ruler, or founder of a dynasty was not a robber or a pirate? With success, piracy only receives another name. Angray had many noble qualities, and his soldiers worshipped him like a Napoleon (sic). (227)

Her re-interpretation of Angray is imperialized, for at least one of her terms of reference (Napoleon) is Western, and this translation of Hindu/Indian values and historical figures into Western discourses so that they can be appreciated by Western readers is one of the dilemmas of imperialism that the story cleverly reveals. In a text that offers a surface advocacy of empire, Swarnakumari Devi encourages her reader to come to anti-imperialist conclusions, and she does so while also engaged in a nationalist exercise through the construction of her various monuments to Indian courage.

This exercise, however, is riven with complications. Ashis Nandy points out in *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* that a colonial system perpetuates itself by forcing the colonized to “accept new social norms and cognitive categories.” Any resistance on the part of the subjugated people, a nationalist movement, for instance, eventually becomes circumscribed by those very norms and categories created by the colonizers for the continuation of their privilege. For Nandy, “the ultimate violence which colonialism does to its victims ... [is] that it creates a culture in which the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter” (3).

Within the masculine paradigm established by the British Raj, in which manliness is equated with political power, physical violence, and feats of courage, Swarnakumari Devi's Maratha warrior and Indian sepoy are playing on imperial turf. As images of cultural pride and national resistance, they are not entirely successful because British men in India had already cornered the market on machismo.

Such was not the case, however, with the Hindu female practice of sati. Sati was a practice without a Western counterpart; hence it remained something of a mystery to the British officials and residents of colonial India, even after its abolition in 1829.⁶ There is certainly an attempt in much official writing about sati to dismiss it as primitive and indicative of the inferior status of the Hindu people, the argument being that any culture that so violently oppresses its women as to throw them onto the funeral pyres of their dead husbands requires the civilizing influence of such a sober and rational race as the English. The existence of sati thus became a source of justification for imperialism, especially once its liberal/evangelical mode began to undermine an older Orientalism. Still, British officials, especially those who had actually witnessed a sati, could not completely explain away instances in which wives apparently chose to die alongside the corpses of their husbands; they could not entirely account for those women who, to use the words of one East India Company surgeon, endured "this fiery trial with most amazing steady, calm resolution, and joyous fortitude" (Holwell 47). As Lata Mani has observed in her well-known essay on the discourse of sati in the early nineteenth century, the depiction of the "widow as perennial victim was not borne out by the experience of colonial officials as recounted by them in the Parliamentary Papers" (117). While the sati who was murdered by her kin could be comprehended within the context of a domestic violence that the British themselves had experienced, had seen working in their own society, though they often chose to believe that their national culture was more progressive in terms of its treatment of women than Indian culture, the sati who died willingly manifested a perspective for which they had no corresponding models.

Swarnakumari Devi was unquestionably aware of this absence in their understanding of certain practises and ideologies surround-

ing certain groups of Indian women, for in her preface she exploits Western bewilderment, which had long since been transformed into an Orientalist trope, to lay claim to a unique and even superior place for the Hindu woman, extending the already existing mystique surrounding sati and numerous other female practices or customs (such as veiling and marriage to gods) to Hindu women generally. She writes, “a Hindu woman is a complete mystery to the foreigner, is she not? Her nature, like her person, is always a veiled wonder to him. Yet those who know her can realise how sweet and noble she is . . . her intense devotion to her husband and his people, her self-effacement and self-sacrifice, and her constant reliance on a Higher Power,—all these rare virtues, as found in her, are too genuine to be imitated by women of other nations” (ii). What the Western reader is meant to infer from these lines is twofold: first, that the Hindu woman is not apprehensible by her British rulers, that she is essentially off limits to them in every possible way—intellectually, physically, socially, and spiritually; and, second, that she embodies the feminine archetype that European women have ever only imitated. Their self-sacrificing angels in the house are merely bad copies of a true original that is finally beyond their grasp. Obviously, Swarnakumari Devi is here using an Orientalist trope against the authority of British knowledge about India. She can assert this view as truth—indeed, as *her* truth, the authentic truth that she as a Hindu woman gets to reveal—because, unlike the ideal of aggressive masculinity that the British controlled, the Hindu feminine, epitomized in the act of sati, had already been made to signify an unasimilatable radical Indian difference.

Still, when Swarnakumari Devi evokes sati through her image of the pillars, from which, she writes at the story’s opening, the ocean sinks back “in wonder and awe, after paying its repeated homage” (226), she is obviously calling up a murky history. She seems to recognize its problems as a symbol appropriate for India’s national character. A partially imagined exchange in the story between the narrator and Mrs. B demonstrates this difficulty. In response to Mrs. B’s denunciation of sati as a “terrible custom,” the narrator retorts, “What terrible courage!” Mrs. B’s subsequent silence speaks volumes to the Indian woman who is acutely

conscious of her subordinated status in this social encounter with the white elite:

[Mrs. B's] curling lip seemed to say:

“Courage indeed! To allow oneself to be burnt alive and not to have the power to utter a word! That is your courage! To be trodden under the heel of subjugation and feel it to be the happiness of virtue. This is indeed natural for a brave people like you.”

If she had really spoken these words, what could I have said in reply? Could ever faith, love and devotion stand the test of argument? (231)

Two *satis* are implicit here. There is the dark *sati*, Mrs. B's version, who is only powerless and coerced and unaware of her oppression, and there is the narrator's *sati*, the incomparable one who kills herself out of the deepest love and selflessness perhaps, but also from some unknowable (to Western readers anyway) motive. It is the second *sati* that she wants to recuperate in “Mutiny” as an emblem of national courage, but she knows that this dying widow comes trailing the sinister implications of the other.

But maybe her depiction of *sati* is not as simple as her conjuring of the standard binary opposition would make it seem. The *satis* are similar in one way: both are silent in the story, as they have been in history, as is, significantly, the narrator in the face of what she knows are British assumptions about herself and her nation. The silence of the *satis* is fertile in that it is productive of interpretations. Historically the *satis*' silence has been read as indicative of both valour and victimhood, with high-caste ideological structures requiring the *sati* to be construed as bravely willing so that her suicide could be a sign not only of the natural ascendancy of the caste Hindu husband,⁷ but also of her readiness to disinherit herself, and British imperial authority needing to see her as, to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, “an object of slaughter, the saving of which can mark the moment when not only a civil but a good society is born out of domestic chaos” (235). As Spivak has consistently maintained, the silence of the *sati* cannot be made to speak her

own desire outside of these formations of power that enfold her and sculpt that desire: “Between patriarchal subject-formation and imperialist object-constitution, it is the place of the free will or agency of the sexed subject as female that is successfully effaced” (235). Evoking both versions of the sati, the serene suicide and the object of slaughter, and then discarding each, Swarnakumari Devi suggests that there is no meaning that can rest in this figure. It calls up ideological battles rather than psychological motivation. It is a minefield that is too dangerous to tread with any serious determination.

Instead of struggling to establish some final and conclusive value that the sati can be shown to embody, her narrator protagonist is made to mimic the sati’s silence, to not speak her will or offer her rationale to the other guests who are her rulers. At one point, just before she introduces the subject of sati to the British women on the verandah, she ruminates on her enforced restraint, which she argues stems from an inability to engage in an easy celebration of her country’s national character because of her place in the imperial hierarchy. In a long internal diatribe that reveals her anger about the personal subordination she must endure in consequence of her people’s standing as a colony of a European empire, during which she complains vehemently about the indignities of colonization, she declares,

We are not treated as equals, nor do we receive the affection that according to our own national ideas, rulers should show to their subjects. If one among so many millions of us shows a disloyal spirit, then we are all considered to be deserving of the gallows.... So it is natural that occidentals should look upon our courage as reflected glory, and our loyalty and self-sacrifice as cringing, dog-like virtues!

And I kept silence.

Never before had I been made to feel my racial inequality in my intercourse with English people. (230–231)

Swarnakumari Devi reveals here that silence does not hide truth; it models power. In this case, it models the power to erase perspective by disguising that perspective as truth, a truth, further, that is invari-

ably mistaken because it is necessarily limited by its own centrality, as Mrs. A's story suggests. Mrs. A's story demonstrates the error in trusting power to produce truth. Because of her assumption that she, a British woman, had to be at the centre of any drama that might occur around her and because she does not possess the linguistic or cultural fluency to comprehend the actions of Indians, Mrs. A mistakes an altercation over her ayah's affections for another Mutiny against her personally and white rule generally, just as, in the narrator's eyes, the British mistake national pride in Indians for mutiny or disloyalty and so prevent its expression by means of such discursive tools as social censure, which is what Mrs. B's curling lip enacts, as well as through the more violently coercive methods for engendering consent, namely, the institutionalized employment of capital punishment, a possibility hinted at in the narrator's mention of the gallows as an appropriate fate for all Indians. Power, as "Mutiny (A True Story)" intimates, must invariably produce misreadings in order to secure itself, misreadings that it passes off as truth. And even silence, a refusal to speak, cannot forestall these misreadings, for the British characters in the larger narrative can read the narrator's silence as agreement, or, with Mrs. B whose curling lip signifies disdain for the narrator's barely articulated view of the sati, can dismiss as error anything the narrator says, as if she had remained silent and not spoken at all. So what Swarnakumari Devi exposes in her "Mutiny" are the power relations that constitute knowledge, that can turn silence into meaning or meaning into silence. Subtly and obliquely, in fact, much like scholars today, Swarnakumari Devi uses the silence of the sati to find a space for herself to speak about the effects of subordination. It is a lamentable irony—considering that her theme here is silence and how it can be made to speak—that this extraordinary story has gone virtually unread for these many, many years.

Given the thorny implications that the sati invariably draws out, it makes sense that Swarnakumari Devi eventually abandons the sati in favour of the gallant and brave Indian soldiers. In 1916 or 1917, when the story was probably written, this undoubtedly seemed the clearer course. The participation of the sepoys in the European war had won them great approbation and gratitude from the English, so much so that

the Indian National Congress was convinced that its demands for political change in India would be met when the war was over. The Congress had hoped to see implemented a package of reforms that would take India to the brink of self-government. Swarnakumari Devi's comment at the end of the story can be understood in this context. Referring to the soldiers, she remarks, "And the Government? It too, has been touched by this enthusiastic self-sacrifice, and it is believed that after the war is over, India will receive her just demands" (238–239). But in 1919 when the Montague-Chelmsford reforms were announced, it became apparent to the majority of the Congress members that these demands had not been sufficiently satisfied. The British government continued to hold self-government out of the reach of the Indian people. The sepoys, therefore, did not fulfil the potential that in "Mutiny" Swarnakumari Devi hoped they possessed. They were not the carriers of national freedom, as she had wanted them to be. But, far from being unprecident, "Mutiny," according to Margaret R. Higonnet, highlights the patriarchal hypocrisy of an imperialist ethos that is disgusted by female self-sacrifice from colonized Indian women at the same time that it condones and even embraces and requires the self-sacrifice of Indian men on European battlefields, a sacrifice that is rendered worthless by subsequent historical events. Higonnet contends, "By stressing the constant process of cultural translation and redefinition, the story raises the possibility that the sepoys' sacrifices may be absurd: they may go unrecognised. India will not be granted autonomy in reward for its sacrifices. We will forget that the Great War reached all the way to Bengal" (160). It could be argued, in fact, that the unfolding of history made the sepoys and their sacrifices for Empire a dead end.

Swarnakumari Devi's first instincts were on the mark. It was not the masculine sepoy or warrior who would come to define the Indian national character, but the feminine sati, whose qualities would later dangerously dominate nationalist politics. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has pointed out that the sati is a particularly female possession: sati belongs to Indian women, since it is identified as "a woman's issue (as a practice that reflected women's status in society)" (168), whatever that practice is said to connote. Emerging as the issue that heralded the arrival of

the social reform movement of the early nineteenth century, with its focus on Indian women of the elite castes and classes, out of which movement nationalism was eventually fashioned, sati provided a foundation for modern Indian politics. The concerns that coalesced around the campaign to outlaw the practice, which resulted in its abolition in 1829, shaped the fundamental *modus operandi* of reform as well as its later incarnation as Indian nationalism. As Tanika Sarkar has argued in relation to Bengal, which was, significantly, Swarnakumari Devi's home, this association between the Indian nation and the feminine figure of the sati, which in turn evolved as a consequence of Hindu middle-class anxiety about the encroachments of British imperialism, has a history that dates back to the nineteenth century and the social reform movement. "The sati," she writes, "was an adored nationalist symbol, her figure representing the moment of climax in expositions of Hindu nationalism" (42). And, again referring specifically to Bengali Hindu nationalism, she adds that "An immense body of patriotic tracts routinely invoked the act [of sati] as an unfailing source of nationalist inspiration and pride" (43). Analyzing the implications of that nationalist history, Anshuman Mondal explicates the process that stretched the interpretation of the caste-specific practice of sati until it could be seen to reflect all Indian women and then linked Indian women to the new Indian nation, symbolized by the potent image of Mother India. Sati's efficacy resided in precisely the quality to which Swarnakumari Devi draws our attention—its ambivalence, hence its openness to interpretation—for it was an act that could be simultaneously read as enshrining women as both strong and weak, uncompromising and yielding: "In the context of colonial subjugation this double signification of femininity could be and was mapped, by both parties, onto the colonizer-colonized relationship such that the colonized became associated with the female sign and was in turn characterized as having these double characteristics. Much of the Janus nature of later nationalist discourse revolved around the idea that Indian culture was both weak and vulnerable, and yet 'great' and superior" (917).

Mohandas K. Gandhi was one of those nationalists who effectively exploited the ambiguity at the heart of this sati=woman=nation equa-

tion. Although it is important to note that Gandhi shared with most of the public figures of his day a contempt for sati as an actual practice,⁸ it is also apparent that the qualities that many nationalist Hindus praised in the female sati, particularly her aggressive self-sacrifice and willingness to suffer, fuelled Gandhian satyagraha. The follower of Gandhi, the satyagrahi, was called upon to display the attributes that increasingly, in the wake of the nineteenth-century social reform movement, came to be associated with the image of the willing sati, which Swarnakumari Devi invokes. He or she was expected to be non-violent—to die rather than to kill (hence to be self-sacrificing), to act not only for the purposes of one's own moral uplift but for the benefit of a larger community, to be brave in the face of physical pain, and, finally, to be loving. Further, Gandhi insisted that there was a “natural” connection between women and ahimsa, the behaviour he attempted to promote in India's satyagrahis. Speaking at a women's meeting in Rome in December 1931, he credited Indian women more than men with the success of the previous year's political campaigns against the salt tax, the manufacture of foreign cloth, and the importation and consumption of liquor, citing their natural suitedness to the role of the satyagrahi as the source of their political achievements: “Non-violent war calls into play suffering to the largest extent, and who can suffer more purely and nobly than women?” he asked (“Speech” 258). In 1939 he drew a connection between what he saw as a feminine capacity for selflessness and an ability to resist without physical aggression: “Woman is the embodiment of sacrifice and therefore non-violence.... I have no doubt that violence so ill becomes woman that presently she will rebel against the violation of her fundamental nature” (“Swaraj Through Women” 312). A year later, in the same journal, *Harijan*, he reiterated his faith in the efficacy of women's altruistic suffering:

I have suggested in these columns that woman is the incarnation of ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure? She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and de-

rives joy in the suffering involved.... Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget she ever was or can be the object of man's lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader. (341)

As the above passage suggests, Gandhi reconstructed the tradition of the willing sati by insisting that this kind of feminine conduct—minus the suicide—was appropriate and even natural to women in all the areas of their lives, not just during the one moment of crisis that occurred for a *very few* of them at the death of a husband. He made an effort too to redefine the term 'sati' so as to draw it away from its suicidal/homicidal connotations. "Our Shastras say that God is incarnate in the person of a pure woman—a sati" ("Speech at Women's Meeting, Padidan" 197), he wrote in 1929, two years later extending that definition when he described his new sati: "a sati would regard marriage ... as a means of realizing the ideal of selfless and self-effacing service by completely merging her individuality in her husband's. She would prove her satihood not by mounting the funeral pyre at her husband's death but ... by her renunciation, sacrifice, self-abnegation and dedication to the service of her husband, his family and the country" ("Twentieth" 248). Here, the link between the sati's sacrifice of self and the nation is made even clearer.

There was, however, one important aspect of sati that his theories of political and spiritual salvation could not accommodate—namely, its marital context as an expression of female sexuality. Sati was primarily commemorated or deplored as an articulation of conjugal love, sexual passion, and duty, or in its darker guise, when the sati was forced or compelled, it was said to disclose Hindu women's abject subordination to the conjugal state. But, with few exceptions, Gandhi appealed to women primarily as the mothers and sisters of men rather than as their wives or lovers.⁹ He did so, I believe, because he sought to contain sati behaviour within the tight confines of a safely unsexual mother or sister mythology. In terms of his twentieth-century nationalist politics, such containment was necessary because, unlike most earlier nation-

alists, who were content to deploy the sati=woman=nation equation while assuming that women would remain in the home as emblems of the nation or inspirers of nationalist men, Gandhi called on women to enter the public sphere with their self-sacrificing activism. A mother/sister ideology, with its focus on women as nurturers of sons and brothers, endorsed a gentle, domestic femininity and was therefore less likely to evoke the dangerously sexual image of the lover/wife.¹⁰ Further, given that nationalist Hindu ideologies surrounding wifehood had to contend with the possibility of wifely unchastity, the mother/sister imperative was more effective in evading the rebellious, anti-patriarchal implications of the darker sati who would not be the sacrifice that her family demanded she be, who would not submit. As radical as was Gandhi's call to women to enter public life in the cause of the nation, as dexterous as was his use of certain traditional notions of femininity,¹¹ Gandhi's female satyagrahi was an oddly compliant resister.

That Swarnakumari Devi conjures up both sides of the sati figure in "Mutiny (A True Story)" attests to her capacity to engage what could have been for women a potentially much more world-changing ideology than Gandhi advocated after her. For Swarnakumari Devi's sati not only defies the British with her uncolonizable difference: in her dissenting aspect (the sati who refuses to climb on the pyre), she can also be interpreted as a threat to Indian patriarchy. Gandhi's theories, on the other hand, though they generally promoted resistance to imperialism, often incorporated a conservative agenda in regards to Indian women. Women were expected to join the nationalist movement and enter the political arena but to return eventually to what he believed were their "traditional" roles at home, namely, as nurturers of children and men and as keepers of households. In contrast to Gandhi, Swarnakumari Devi explores these "traditional" roles for women (and others besides) in her *Short Stories* and her longer English and Bengali fiction, often questioning middle- and upper-class Hindu society's expectations for its females by demonstrating the sometimes damaging effects of these roles. She was interested in women as something more than the icon of India's subjection, the symbol of India's nationhood, or as some ideal of a nationally appropriate behaviour. It seems that in many ways

Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal was prepared in the 1910s to go farther in her conception of women's role in the national movement and their stake in the nation than Gandhi was willing to go even as late as the 1940s.

Gandhi's implicit appropriation of the feminine sati, his exploitation of Western suspicion about and incomprehension of the Indian feminine, worked brilliantly to blindside the hypermasculinity through which the British maintained their rulership, as Nandy has argued in *The Intimate Enemy*. But it was because female writers such as Swarnakumari Devi were trying to redeploy and redefine the sati in terms they could manage for their own purposes that Gandhi was able to metamorphose this image in the interests of a larger patriarchal Indian nation. That he was indebted to less-valued writers and thinkers like Swarnakumari Devi needs to be remembered and inserted into the historical record so that we can begin to quell this still-present and tiresome tendency in most patriarchal thought, even of the posthumanist variety, to valorize the lone male genius who seems to arise out of nothing to transform the world.

I think we can look in Swarnakumari Devi's "Mutiny" to find the seeds of future nationalist ideals and also to uncover that which the later nationalists ignored, suppressed, or deliberately jettisoned from their politics. And we can do this partly because "Mutiny" was written at such a threshold in the history of India's nationalist movement. This was a period, around 1916, when the movement was both floundering and gathering momentum. The Congress split of 1907 had left two of its factions, the moderates, led by Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and the extremists, led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, at odds. In 1908 the British government convicted Tilak of sedition and sentenced him to six years imprisonment. Gokhale died in early 1915, just after Gandhi had returned to India from South Africa. There was among the elite classes a confusion of India's national heroes and an altering of ideals. When Swarnakumari wrote her story, the Gandhian version of nationalism had not yet taken hold, nor had the older constitutional and Hindu revivalist modes been transformed into the configurations that would manifest so influentially in the later twentieth century. It was a suspended moment of enormous

potential. Swarnakumari Devi, demonstrating keen instincts, attuned her writing to it and articulated its teeming possibilities.

She also—let it be said—helped to engender a notion of Indian national culture that normalized it as middle-class and racialized it as Hindu.¹² In her understandable desire to make herself and those women like her heard in a larger world outside the confines of the narrow domesticity that her brother Rabindranath insisted had rendered her viewpoint inauthentic,¹³ a charge that betrays his inability or unwillingness to acknowledge what she could see in that narrowness that he could never grasp, even with all his advantaged reach, Swarnakumari Devi neglected to apply the lessons she sought to teach through the writing and publication of “Mutiny”: namely, that perspective is harnessed to power and that power hampers perspective. A similar privilege to the one that prevented her brother from comprehending the distinction and value of her vision kept many nationalist elites from being able to see those beneath them in class or distanced from them by communal difference as little more than stereotypes filtered through the limitations of their own cultural, social, and economic dominance. Seeing only the stereotypes meant that they could not even hear nor ever appreciate the profound usefulness and greater scope of those perspectives fashioned by the experience of a subordinated existence. Had they been able to hear and been willing to act, India would be a substantially different place for Hindus to call home, and the Dalits, Muslims, Christians, and other minority and overruled communities in India today might not be living with the consequences of a national ideal that could not let them in or allow them to reap the full rewards of nationhood. For this was a nationalism that, though itself founded out of a desire to be heard, still sadly neglected to hear its own Others when it chucked out the empire.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Enriched by South Asia: Celebrating Twenty Five Years of Scholarship on South Asia in Canada*, edited by Elliot L. Tepper and John R. Wood and published by the Canadian Asian Studies Association (CASA), 1994. I would like to thank the editors and CASA for permission to reprint material from that essay. I would also like to thank Nandi

- Bhatia for her wonderfully helpful comments on the first draft of this essay and Whitney Slightham for her research assistance.
- 2 See Tharu and Lalita's introduction, where they make this assertion.
 - 3 See Hubel ("Charting") for an examination of this shift in the aims of the feminist movement.
 - 4 For example, in Karlekar's book, Sarala Devi's autobiography is explored in a great deal of detail, while her much-more-published mother appears in the daughter's story sporadically and negatively, as a mother who had, at least according to Sarala's remembrances, rejected Sarala as a child and who still insisted on constraining her freedom by marrying her off to a widower when she was in her early 30s. Uma Chakravarti takes a similarly disapproving view of Swarnakumari Devi, when in her description of Sarala's life as an activist, she insists that Swarnakumari "emotionally blackmailed" (65) her daughter to get her to marry.
 - 5 I'm grateful to Higonnet's reading of "Mutiny" in her essay "The Literature of World War I and Conflicting Female Identities" for this insight into the connection between the story's structural elements and its themes.
 - 6 In his 2005 essay, which seeks to establish if, as so many scholars have asserted, rituals comparable to sati existed outside India, Fisch mentions that there is some indication that following into death customs were practiced in some Eastern European regions during the medieval period, but that "[t]here is as of yet no satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon" (302). What this suggests is that, even if the British had known about these closer-to-home rituals, it's not likely that they were aware of the larger ideology that generated them, as they would have been with sati.
 - 7 Though Spivak and Fisch, as well as many others, insist that sati crosses caste and class lines, Sahai argues in a recent essay that such overgeneralizations have been made in the absence of scholarship to support them. Contending that elite practices have been allowed to obliterate subaltern realities, thereby homogenizing the multifariousness of multicultural colonial India, she insists that "the practice of widow remarriage constituted the defining attribute of subordinate castes in Brahminical Hinduism" (37) and proves her statement through an analysis of eighteenth-century texts from the Marwar region, which, historically, has been regarded as the "capital" of sati (38).
 - 8 Responding to an alleged case of sati that was reported in the Bombay vernacular press in 1931, Gandhi makes it abundantly clear that he finds the custom deplorable: "the practice of the widow immolating herself at the death of her husband had its origin in superstitious ignorance and the blind egotism of man. Even if it could be proved that at one time the practice had meaning, it can only be regarded as barbarous in the present age" ("Twentieth Century Sati(?)" 249).
 - 9 In her 1985 three-part essay, which examines Gandhi's often contradictory and complex view of women, Kishwar makes this point succinctly: "the role of the educated, middle class woman in public life was to be an extension of her do-

- mestic role of selfless service. Women were to enter public life as ‘sisters’ and ‘mothers’ in the same garb of pseudo- veneration which had hitherto masked their exploitation in the family where their relation to social and public life was strictly mediated through men. Gandhi’s very vocabulary, in its exaggerated idealisation of women as ‘sisters of mercy’ and ‘mothers of entire humanity’ reveals the bias of a benevolent patriarch” (Parts I and II, 1701).
- 10 See Sarkar for a more fully developed analysis of this shift in emphasis in Gandhian politics.
- 11 For largely positive interpretations of Gandhi’s adoption and advocacy of femininity as a political force, see Karlekar and Nandy. Kishwar’s essay, on the other hand, acknowledges the emancipatory potential of Gandhian ideology as well as its function as a containment strategy that prevented women from achieving any “real political power” (Part III, 1757). Katrak expresses a similar ambivalence.
- 12 Many of the stories in *Short Stories* as well as a number of her novels are concerned with establishing the indigeneity of the Hindu in India and the extraneousness of the Muslim to Indian identity. As such, they can be regarded as part of the Hindu revivalism that characterized Tilak’s extremist nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century and that laid the groundwork for a Hindu fundamentalism that was to generate so much violence against Muslims and other non-Hindu communities 100 years later.
- 13 Sogani and Gupta write that “Rabindranath Tagore was against the publication of *An Unfinished Song*. According to him, Swarnakumari Devi’s writings lacked authenticity as she had little experience of the outside world.... The unfairness of Tagore’s judgment will be evident to the readers of *The Uprooted Vine*” (250, note 4).

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