

Unspeakable Outrages and Unbearable Defilements: Rape Narratives in the Literature of Colonial India

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British colonial fiction from about the middle of the nineteenth century to the First World War is replete with tales of affronts to the European woman, the so-called *memsahab*. Many such tales are set during the Rebellion of 1857, a major event in India's colonial history, after which British policies and practices were more and more colored by the rhetoric of the racial and cultural superiority of the West.¹ These fictional narratives often replicate sensational first-person accounts of rape once disseminated in local media and in official government reports. Such rape narratives typically involve "savage brutes" assailing delicate white victims, reinscribing myths of racial superiority and validation for a civilizing mission in India. They also worked to justify Britain's brutal suppression of the uprisings of 1857 and continued domination of India. The height of "Mutiny fiction" was in the 1890s, a generation after the fact, when nineteen novels were published (*Indian Mutiny* 6). Besides more than eighty novels (*Writing* 111), poems, plays and even children's stories were published on the subject. In the early twentieth century, however, Britain's appetite for Mutiny novels diminished, as imperialism became less viable and less palatable. It is against the denouement of Mutiny fiction that we find E.M. Forster's majestic indictment of imperialism, ironically through the hypothetical rape of an Englishwoman, Adela Quested. Jenny Sharpe has already elucidated this dramatic reversal in the use of rape narratives in colonial-era fiction, arguing that the rape of white women by brown-skinned assailants operates to both uphold imperial authority in some contexts, and ironically, to contest it in others.

¹ The Sepoy Rebellion was in fact a series of uprisings that occurred in much of North India in the summer of 1857. The unrest first occurred in a military cantonment in Meerut and then quickly spread to other military installations, cities and villages. It took 14 months for the British to re-establish their suzerainty. For over a year, the British lost control over 1/6 of India's territory and 1/10 of her population. Eventually, the British brutally suppressed the rebellion, at great expense, financially and in terms of lives lost. Colonial historians first dubbed this event the "Sepoy Mutiny" while Indian nationalist historians have preferred "the First war of Indian independence." The latter object to the designation "Sepoy Mutiny," noting that the rebellion in fact engaged many beyond the ranks of the military and that it was in no way an illegal act of mutiny.

In the rape narratives of Mutiny fiction, Sharpe identifies a strong endorsement of the colonial project. However, in twentieth-century novels like Forster's *Passage to India* (1924) and Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966) Sharpe claims that rape narratives articulate anxiety about British colonial exploitation. In the former, the white "victim" recants her accusation of rape in court, and in the latter, the wrongly-accused is brutally tortured.

Previous scholarship has already dealt with the issue of rape in British colonial fiction, especially in *A Passage to India*.² In the present study, I intend to further elaborate on the instability of the signifier of rape, by contrasting how rape narratives are handled in literature of both the colonizers and of the colonized. Rape, in literature written by and for Indians, is a subject that has not received rigorous treatment in existing scholarship. This is perhaps understandable given that postcolonial studies in the western academe is fixated on texts written in English and of those, the ones which foreground the interface of the colonized and the colonizers. Whether it is about one of the "big three," Kipling, Conrad and Forster, or Rushdie and his English-writing compatriots, the focus of much postcolonial scholarship is "about us"—even when it is explicitly "about them." This is the case despite the fact that Indian literature written in languages other than English is vastly less concerned with British experiences and interventions in India. Even in the late colonial period, English characters only occasionally register in non-English Indian literature.

Even so, rape narratives do figure prominently in Indian literature of the colonial period. To be more precise, Indian literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is full of mythological and epic stories about venerated heroines abducted and/or violated by villainous, if not demonic hands. Three of the most common variations on this theme are the abduction of Sita by the demon Ravana, the attempted disrobing of Draupadi by Duhshasana (2.60-61), and the attempted rape of Draupadi by Kichaka (4.13-23)—pivotal scenes from the two major epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.³ In Hindi alone, there are dozens of plays and poems on these themes which were published between 1910 and 1947. Popular in the early decades of the twentieth century, this genre of mythological literature may be seen as a fitting rejoinder to the affirmations of imperialism so palpable in the genre of Mutiny fiction of an earlier generation. Both genres once appealed to a vast commercial market but have since gone out of critical favor. Both favored melodrama

² Jenny Sharpe and Paxton, for example, have produced ground-breaking studies of rape narratives particular to Mutiny novels during the period of high colonialism in India. Chakravarty has also made an excellent contribution with his study of the British representations of the 1857 rebellion, not only in the genre of the Mutiny novel, but also in first-person accounts, colonial records and British historiography.

³ The epic heroine Draupadi is also violated in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* when King Jayadratha attempts to abduct her in a scene figuratively tantamount to rape when her husbands are away on a hunting expedition (3.248-256).

and hyperbole. And both advocated messages that resonated deeply with their intended audiences: imperialist Britishers and nationalist Indians, respectively. However, while British texts foreground outrages, that is, affronts to British honor too horrific to describe in detail, Indian texts emphasize issues of purity and pollution in figurative rapes about the violation of a nation.

I proceed by contrasting rape narratives in a prime example of a Mutiny novel, Flora Annie Steel's epic-length *On the Face of the Waters* (1896) and Forster's classic *A Passage to India* with the rape narratives in Dinabandhu Mitra's early Bengali play, *Neel Darpan* (*The Blue Mirror*, 1860) and a typical mythological play, *Bhima-Vikram: Rang-Natak* (*Bhima's Glory, a Stage Play*, [1935]) by Rameshvar Chaumval ("Kaviratna"). I focus on these works because they so effectively represent trends in the respective literatures. Steel's is perhaps the quintessential Mutiny novel, and one perhaps more widely read than any other. It was preceded by such popular novels as Edward Money's *The Wife and the Ward; or, a Life's Error* (1859), James Grant's *First Love and Last Love: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny* (1868), Meadows Taylor's *Seeta* (1872), G.A. Henty's *Rujub, the Juggler* (1893), Jules Verne's *The Demon of Cawnpore [The End of Nana Sahib]* (1880), and J.E.P. Muddock's *The Star of Fortune* (1895). I also briefly discuss *A Passage to India* for it is an exception to the rule of the Mutiny genre. Fittingly, Forster's novel was published in 1924, during the height of the vogue of mythological literature—the very era of *Bhima's Glory*. Reading *On the Face of the Waters* and *A Passage to India* against *The Blue Mirror* and *Bhima's Glory*, I show how rape is handled very differently in British and Indian literature. Although Steel considered hers to be an unbiased and accurate account of the 1857 rebellion, she nonetheless draws on contemporary stereotypes of Indian men (especially Muslim men of rank) as decadent and depraved, as well as sensational, largely unsubstantiated rumors about the rape of white women. In short, her novel validates the imperialist status quo. Forster, in contrast, uses rape to contest the same.

While most Indian rape narratives are coded in allegories of abduction and attempted disrobing from Hindu lore, one exception was *The Blue Mirror*. Just as *A Passage to India* is a historically important exception to the rule of Mutiny fiction, so too is *The Blue Mirror* with respect to mythological literature. Although it is generally not praised for its literary quality, this play holds an important place in the history of anti-British literature. Published just three years after the 1857 rebellion, this play is unusual in its frank depiction of the sexual harassment and assault by European indigo planters on local female cultivators. Yet this "proto-nationalist" play is reluctant to condemn the colonial apparatus outright, and even contains occasional pronouncements of loyalty. Unlike later Indian literature dealing with the epic heroines Sita and Draupadi, here we find a critique of individual Europeans—bad apples in the proverbial imperial orchard—rather than a root-and-branch critique of imperialism itself. This is not the case in Chaumval's play, published about 75 years

later. This later play dramatizes the violation of an epic queen, Draupadi, in a morality play about the rape of Mother India. Updated and significantly altered from its Sanskrit precedent, *Bhima's Glory* is imbued with Gandhian rhetoric. Mobilization against the defilement of Draupadi and other atrocities is a cipher for the mobilization of the nationalist movement against the British Raj. By the time Chaumuval produced this play in the mid-1930s, Indian nationalists were well-versed in the economic and cultural violence of colonialism and were not to be appeased by conciliatory rhetoric and largely symbolic gestures toward self-rule. Chaumuval's play is likewise typical of the mythological plays based on the Indian epics. Works about the violation of the epic heroine Draupadi proliferated in the nationalist period.⁴ Many of these works were penned by obscure writers, but important works like Maithilisharan Gupta's *Sairandhri* (1927) and Kailashnath Bhatnagar's *Bhima Pratijna* (*Bhima's Vow*, [1934]) in Hindi and Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar's *Kichaka-Vadh* (*The Slaying of Kichaka*, 1907), set powerful precedents.

Taken together, these four works—*On the Face of the Waters*, *The Blue Mirror*, *A Passage to India*, and *Bhima's Glory*—suggest the multivalent if not over-determined nature of the female body in Indian colonial literature—a body that has been alternately constructed to valorize and demonize, oppress and resist. I also aim to establish that rape *is* a subject Indian writers broached in colonial-era literature, albeit most often elliptically, by referencing traditional stories and deeply imbedded ideas about defilement.⁵ Salman Rushdie once provocatively wrote that “if a rape must be used as the metaphor of the Indo-British connection, then surely, in the interests of accuracy, it should be the rape of an Indian woman by one or more Englishmen of whatever class—not even Forster dared to write about such a crime” (cited in *Allegories* 139). Rushdie here seems to suggest that Indian colonial literature lacks a precedent for a rape

⁴ Bhagvannarayan Bhargav, *Kichaka* (1923); Kailashnath Bhatnagar, *Bhima-Pratijna: Vir Ras ka Advitiya Natak* (4th printing [1934]); Badrinath Bhatt, *Kuru-Van-Dahan: Ek Gadya Padya May*, *Vir Ras Pradhan Natak* (1912); Rameshvar Chaumuval [Kaviratna, pseud.], *Bhima-Vikram: Rang Natak* [1935]; Ganesh Das, *Draupadi ki Lavani* (1916); L. Deshraj, *Draupadi-Lila* (1917); Mahavirprasad Dube, *Venisamhar Natak ka Akhyayika* (1913); Dvarakaprasad Gupta [Rasikendra, pseud.], *Ajnatvas ya Kichaka Vadh* (1921); Maithilisharan Gupta, *Sairandhri* (1927); Shivdas Gupta [Kusum, pseud.], *Kichaka Vadh: Vir Ras Purn Khandakavya* (1921); Ramsvarup Kaishal, *Draupadi* [1928]; Lakshminarayan [Saroj, pseud.], *Draupadi-Chirharan* [1930]; Shivdatt Mishra, *Bhima Shakti: Samajik Natak (Mahabharata Kalin Dharmik evam Aitihasic Mishrit Natak)* (193?); Shivnarayan Mishra, *Draupadi-Chirharan Natak* (1913), *Shri Draupadi Natak (Dusra Bhag)* (1914); Gaurishankar Prasad, *Draupadi-Chirharan Natak* (1926); Ramdev Sharma, *Draupadi* (1922); Ramji Sharma, *Draupadi-Chirharan Natak* (1925); Jivanand Sharmma [Kavyatirth, pseud.], *Bhima-Pratijna: Stage par Khelne Yogya Natak* (n.d.); Jagdishnarayan Tivari, *Duryodhana-Vadh* (1926); Lodheshvar Tripathi, *Draupadi-Chirharan aur Ahla* (1914); Katyanidatt Trivedi, *Draupadi* (1919); and Ramcharit Upadhyay, *Devi Draupadi: Pauranik Akhyayika* (1920).

⁵ This makes sense given that the British banned public performances “likely to excite feelings of disaffection to the Government established by law in British India” with the Dramatic Performances Control Act XIX of 1876 (cited in *Poetics* 60).

narrative with an Indian victim. In her own response to Rushdie's statement, Jenny Sharpe suggests that English authors were simply *incapable* of writing about the rape of an Indian woman: "The question that needs to be asked, however, is not whether Forster could dare to represent an Indian woman being raped by an English man but whether that narrative possibility was historically available to him. I would say that it was not" (*Allegories* 139). To my mind, what is most significant is not that "even Forster" supposedly did not dare to or perhaps lacked "the narrative possibility" to write about the rape of native women, but that Indian writers themselves were writing about it—and in ways that vilified the British.

Forster's rape metaphor has been an influential one. Various scholars, including Frantz Fanon and Laura Donaldson, have emphasized the rape of a colonizing woman by a native man as a master trope for imperialism.⁶ Fanon, in fact, muses from the "blackest part" of his soul, "When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine" (*Black Skin* 63). The example of British Mutiny fiction at once seems to support this view. However, while the trope of rape in Mutiny fiction undoubtedly serves the interests of British imperialism, the same trope in contemporaneous regional literatures of India (though now with Indian victims) serves quite a different purpose, namely to discredit the supposed moral authority of the British and undermine Britain's imperialist project. In these indigenous narratives of rape we most often find cases of sublimation and transference, such that rape is more figurative than real, and characters are more divine (or demonic) than human. Although the implicit aims of works considered here differ markedly, in all cases the female body becomes a sign through which, to borrow Jenny Sharpe's phrase, "allegories of empire" are enacted. While this is not surprising in itself, what is perhaps remarkable is that recent scholarship on the subject of rape narratives in colonial India has been almost exclusively centered on those produced by the British, for the British.

Both Mitra's play about the indigo system and Chaumuval's play about the disrobing of an epic heroine frame rape not as penetration of the female body, but as the utter defilement of it. Drawing on familiar notions of ritual purity and pollution in a Hindu schema, the plays suggest that what is being defiled is no less than the body politic of Mother India. The association of female corporality with a gendered Indian nation is a

⁶ Paxton questions Fanon's thesis that "the colonizing woman is the original rape narrative in British writing about India" (4), and argues that even prior to the 1857 rebellion, an earlier "rape script" was in play. This rape script involved the violation of Indian women by British men in the context of a scandal which arose over the first Governor-General of colonial India, Warren Hastings. Both Paxton and Sara Suleri have written about the scandal in which Hastings and his men were accused of crimes tantamount to the economic rape of the country and of acquiescence to the physical violation of Indian women. Edmund Burke, Hastings' nemesis, kept Hastings embroiled in legal battles from 1787 when he was impeached until 1795 when he was acquitted.

common one in Indian literature of the period. I read the female bodies in these plays not as the outer or material manifestation of female or even subaltern subjectivity. My goal is not to “recover” a subaltern subject by listening to a representative subaltern “voice” in Indian rape narratives. As Edward Said eloquently states, “truth” “itself is a representation” and that representations usually operate “for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting. In other words, representations have purposes . . .” (*Orientalism* 272, 273). Rather I read the bodies as discursive constructs, invested with divinity and at the same time marked by colonial practices, in much the same way as Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick do in their discussion of “social reform” relating to Indian women in nineteenth-century British India. They bring to bear a useful Foucauldian understanding of the colonial *body politic* as that which “is concerned with the set of material elements and techniques through which power/knowledge relations are mapped onto the individual body of Indian women” (*Mapping* 390). Gayatri Spivak has also commented on nineteenth-century discourse which charges white men with “saving” brown women from brown men (“Subaltern” 297). For Price and Shildrick, the reformist zeal to “save” Indian women ultimately worked to further enslave India in oppressive discourses and practices. The palimpsest quality of the female Indian body here reminds us of the discursive imperative that allows her to be victimized by both her “own” and her “other.”

The *memsahab* outraged

Like other Mutiny novels, Steel’s draws on the trope of the rape of white woman, casting Britain’s “civilizing mission” in sexualized and racialized terms. According to Steel, her novel is a realistic and accurate account of events surrounding the 1857 rebellion with perspectives of both Indian and British characters. The novel is centered on British characters—*memsahabs*, military officers, and one Kipling-esque master-of-disguise. But to her credit, she attempts to present a range of Indian characters—mutinous and loyal, Hindu and Muslim, aristocratic and common, male and female—though these characters are somewhat stereotypical, some even approaching Orientalist caricatures. In her autobiography, *The Garden of Fidelity*, Steel recounts how as a child she remembers hearing stories of alleged atrocities committed during the rebellion, and says she even “burnt and hanged and tortured the Nana Saheb in effigy many times” (15). Nana Saheb was an aristocrat who became infamous in Britain for his massacre of scores of British women and children who sought his protection at a garrison in Kanpur. Steel, who spent twenty three years in India as the wife of civil servant, also describes how she wrote the novel after her long stay in India, returning to India to scrupulously research the rebellion, and even gaining access to classified government documents that had been sealed in a box.

Previous readings of the novel by Sharpe and Nancy Paxton have concentrated on the female protagonist Kate Erlton, a long-suffering *memsahab* who tolerates her husband's gambling and even his adulterous affair with another married woman, Alice Gissing. They have also centered on Tara, a brahmin widow and servant who at the end of the novel effectively stages her own *sati*, by immolating herself in the fires of the rebellion. Both Sharpe and Paxton seem to laud the feminist potential of the novel, for it makes of Kate Erlton a Victorian heroine who ultimately survives on her wits and several months later, negotiates her own escape to the Ridge outside Delhi where British troops are positioned. Sharpe makes a striking comparison between Kate Erlton and Jane Eyre, writing, "The feminist plotting of *On the Face of the Waters* lies in its undoing of the domestic ideal that confines women to the protected space of the home" (*Allegories* 97).

In my own reading of the novel, I question the feminist orientation of a novel that so forcefully evokes unspeakable outrages perpetrated against *memsahabs* in the wake of the rebellion, not only with respect to Kate Erlton, but also to Alice Gissing, the cold-hearted "other woman." After the rebellion breaks out, a former officer, and sometime spy, Jim Douglas, whisks Kate Erlton to the safety of a British garrison. Later while under attack, she again meets up with Jim Douglas in the guise of a rebel and endures a harrowing flight into hiding in Delhi. Paxton has rightly noted that Kate Erlton, screaming and flailing on Jim Douglas' horse, ironically feigns the scene of her own abduction in order to escape the 'mutinous' hoards. As Jim Douglas gallops through the city with Kate Erlton before him on the saddle, he coaches her,

"Now scream—scream like the devil. No! let your arms slack as if you'd fainted—people won't look so much—that's better—that's capital—now—ready!" . . . The words, describing the rape of the Sabine women, over the construing of which he remembered being birched at school recurred to him, as such idle thoughts will at such times, as he hitched his hand tighter on Kate's dress and scattered the first group with a coarse jest or two (*Waters* 213).

Jim Douglas's thoughts are significant here not merely for conjuring Victorian codes of chivalry, for he evokes a myth popular in colonial narratives of India: the myth of the Raj as the new Roman empire. His thoughts are prophetic as well; he ultimately does marry Kate Erlton and bring her to his new Rome in the metropole London. But his thoughts are also jarring as we recall that he is in the guise of a "native" Afghan rebel, not of a British officer.

While Kate Erlton is not actually abducted or raped, she does narrowly escape falling into the hands of a Mughal prince while in hiding. Eliciting the stereotype of a depraved Oriental despot, a raging and intoxicated Prince Abool-Bukr has determined to kill all infidels in the vicinity and somehow suspects that a *mem* is within his range. "From sheer devilry and desire to outrage the quarter . . . the prince had begun battering at the door" (341). As he breaks down the door, Kate Erlton

escapes by jumping onto a low roof, then the street, and fleeing into the night. Both this scene of aborted rape and the earlier one of her feigned abduction evoke the unspeakable outrages perpetrated on white women during the rebellion. What is more, Kate Erlton is not only a victim in the colonial tropology of rape, she is also very much complicit with empire. Like Jim Douglas and Kim in Kipling's novel, she dons a disguise and "goes native" when she passes rebel lines to make her escape.⁷ Incredible as it is that she could "pass" at the height of the rebellion in Delhi in the garb of a pious widow, even spending time in a temple in close quarters with other "natives," Kate Erlton replicates the white hero of the colonial romance novel set in India. Like the archetypal Orientalist romantic hero, Jim Douglas, she knows the natives more than they know themselves. They can "pass" while the natives fail miserably at imitating white *sahibs*. Kate Erlton, it turns out, proves herself not only to be a capable *mem* but also the ideal Hindu widow—albeit a feigned widow—even more pious and dutiful than Jim Douglas' humiliated and widowed servant Tara. Her dramatic escape notwithstanding, Kate Erlton's gestures toward emancipation from Victorian domesticity are ultimately checked by her own complicity with the Orientalist project.

Another *memsahab* in the novel, Alice Gissing, is also the victim of a sublimated rape that enacts the trope of brown aggressor/white victim. This occurs when Kate Erlton goes to confront her husband's lover, Alice Gissing, a woman who embodies the worst of the stereotypical *memsahab*; she is self-centered, racist, adulterous and materialistic—someone with a coterie of admirers who married for money and like her husband "preferred India, where they were received into society, to England, where they would have been out of it" (48). Yet outwardly, she is the picture of Victorian chastity and innocence—petite and child-like, with blue eyes and blond curls. While the women are chatting in Alice Gissing's sitting room, the rebellion unexpectedly arrives in her backyard. A green-turbaned *moulvie* with a "spiritual relentless face" is chasing a young blond, blue-eyed neighbor boy through the gardens shouting "*Deen! Deen Futteh Mahomed!* (Faith! Faith! Victory to Muhammad!), and bearing a "long lance in rest like pig-sticker's" (208). Naturally, Steel's *moulvie* conjures images of the "fanatic" Muslim *jihadi*. Ultimately, when Alice Gissing comes to the boy's rescue, he fatally pierces her with his lance, just before Jim Douglas inexplicably arrives in native garb and shoots him dead.

The scene here corresponds to circulated accounts of innocent women and children being brutally killed by fanatical rebels during the 1857 rebellion. And like such accounts, the act of rape is often only intimated, the gross details left for the horrified reader to imagine. The scene also suggests the physical violation of a woman who, though by Victorian

⁷ *On the Face of the Waters* has been unjustly overshadowed by Kipling's *Kim*, published five years later in 1901. Kipling's novel lacks credible, multi-dimensional female characters and at the same time revels in escapist, boyish tales of romantic adventure.

standards has debased herself through infidelity and coquetry, here ironically signifies the purity and sanctity of British womanhood. Confronting her lifeless body, Jim Douglas “saw a broken shaft among the frills and ribbons, a slow stream oozing in gushes to dye them crimson . . . To his wild rage, his insane hatred, there seemed a desecration even in that cold touch of steel from a dark hand” (209). Alice Gissing’s body shrouded in white frills and ribbons has been violated by the *moultie*’s phallic lance such that Jim Douglas resents the desecration of his defiling “dark hand.”

Steel’s novel clearly accepts of the imperialist project and reinforces Orientalist stereotypes in ways that Forster’s *A Passage to India* does not. Given that this latter novel has been so fully critiqued elsewhere, I only briefly discuss the relevance of its rape narrative here. Rather than allude to outrages too unspeakable to mention, *A Passage to India* speaks directly of an outrage that never really was. But while the rape of a *memsabe* is discredited, a greater horror is ironically exposed, that of the rape of a nation. Here the *memsabe* in question, Adela Quested, is the very antithesis of an ideal beauty, a woman so plain that Dr. Aziz is ashamed to be associated with her sexually, even in hearsay. But she is a woman allegedly wronged nonetheless when she momentarily decides that Dr. Aziz made a gesture to rape her in a Marabar cave, a position she ultimately recants on the witness stand, to the great displeasure of her countrymen. The mystery of what actually happens in the cave is never revealed, Fielding content to believe it was a hallucination. What Miss Quested maintains initially is that Dr. Aziz lured her into a cave and made a gesture to pull her by her field glasses, at which point she fled. Even she does not claim that physical contact occurred.

The alleged rape of Miss Quested rehearses in the minds of her compatriots the supposed mass rapes of British women at the time of the 1857 rebellion, hence their utter shock and rush to judgement. In one scene while the British characters discuss the case from the security of their club, the narrator notes, “The crime was even worse than they had supposed—the unspeakable limit of cynicism, untouched since 1857” (*Passage* 187). The British Collector, Mr. Turton, even longs “for the good old days when an Englishman could satisfy his own honour and no questions asked afterward” (183). Although cold to the newcomer in the beginning, the British community comes to view her as a symbol of British virtue and righteousness: “Each felt that all he loved best in the world was at stake, demanded revenge, and was filled with a not unpleasing glow, in which the chilly and half-known features of Miss Quested vanished and were replaced by all that is sweetest and warmest in the private life” (183). So it is not surprising that they are utterly mortified and outraged when Miss Quested says under oath that Dr. Aziz did not follow her into the Marabar cave after all. From the point of view of Dr. Aziz and his supporters, however, the British themselves and their justice are on trial. At one point, one of Dr. Aziz’s lawyers, Mahmoud Ali, exclaims to the Indian judge, “I am not defending a case, nor are you

trying one. We are both of us slaves” (224). Though he is ejected from the courthouse for this remark, his is the more meaningful “verdict.” The trial for the alleged rape of Miss Quested ultimately shows the miscarriage of justice in colonial India, along with the moral failures and hypocrisy of the British regime.

Ritual pollution on an indigo plantation

Between *On the Face of the Waters* and *A Passage to India*, we may detect a massive shift in attitudes toward imperialism, attitudes which are apparent in their respective treatments of the violated or allegedly violated female body. Rape narratives in both British and Indian literature work to associate the female body with a gendered nation and/or a national ethos. However, there is a major difference between them. Forster’s novel notwithstanding, British works most often use rape to defend imperialism in tales that evoke cultural memories of mutinous hoards. Rape narratives in Indian literature, conversely, are very concerned with the notions of ritual pollution or defilement and work to demonize individual predators, if not the Raj itself. In *The Blue Mirror* the defiling hand is that of a white indigo planter, and the defiled body that of a young, pregnant Indian woman.⁸ The Bengali writer Bankimchandra Chatterjee once called *The Blue Mirror* the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of Bengal for its scathing indictment of the injustices of the indigo system, and for the author’s loyalist leanings. The Marxist critic, Ranajit Guha, even goes so far to assert that Mitra was one of the groveling “stalwarts of the Bengali Renaissance” who “excelled many of them [*babus*] in the obsequiousness with which he could put these [loyalist feelings] into words” (“Peasant Revolt” 14).

It is true that Mitra, like many Indian intellectuals of his time, had divided loyalties, and this comes out clearly in his prologue to the play. Let us not forget that he was writing only three years after the rebellion of 1857. Insecure about their control of India, the British were then consolidating their power and dealing mercilessly with non-collaborators. Thus Mitra may have been swayed by both fear of reprisal and a genuine sense of gratitude toward the British when he writes in his prologue, “I am offering *Neel Darpan* [*The Blue Mirror*] to the numerous planters of indigo, so that they may take a look at their own faces, reflected in it. May they wipe off those dark, shameful marks of greed and selfishness, which now stain their foreheads, and adorn them instead with feelings of concern for others, pure and spotless as sandalwood paste” (*Blue Devil* 183). Mitra goes on to imply that his play is an indictment not of the colonial system as such, but of European indigo planters as a class. Still, Mitra’s concern for the welfare of indigo cultivators was inseparable from a concern for the preservation of British hegemony and the assumed honor of the (British) nation’s character. He concludes his prologue with extravagant

⁸ The play has been translated by Amiya Rao and B. G. Rao and is included in their critical work, *The Blue Devil: Indigo and Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1992). I have used a more literal translation of the title, *The Blue Mirror*.

praise for Queen Victoria: “The kind mother of her subjects,” who “has taken them into her own lap and is suckling them herself,” and likewise lauds leaders of colonial regime: Governor-General Canning, Lieutenant-Governor Grant, and other such “enlightened men” whom he considers sympathetic to native interests (184).

Despite Mitra’s divided loyalties, *The Blue Mirror* is a powerful piece of anti-colonial literature as well as a harsh critique of the injustices of the indigo system in colonial India. Mitra spent his adult life stationed in the indigo districts as an inspector for the post office, and understood very well the system and its culture (*Dinabandhu Mitrer* 1). Yet his play is, in fact, a blatantly moralistic tale, pitting sordid and sadistic planters against the noble folk of rural Bengal. The indigo planters are utterly depraved creatures who commit every conceivable atrocity. While the Bengalis, ranging from landless cultivators to the members of the landed middle class, reveal implausible virtue. A rape narrative contrary to the one in *On the Face of the Waters* occurs in the play which is obviously meant to drive home the heinousness of indigo planters. That is, a planter with the transparent name of Rob Rogue attempts to rape a young woman named Kshetramani whose name may be translated “jewel of the field.” The obvious implication is that white opportunists are stripping bare and plundering the natural resources of Mother India, here signified by the body of the chaste and fecund Kshetramani. What is more, they are defiling her pure land with an alien, exploitative presence. The planter is also called P.P. Rogue which works to associate him with a bodily fluid which, in Hindu terms, is highly polluting in both a ritual and physical sense. Rogue even threatens to defile a Muslim peasant with his urine!:

Rogue: Shut up, you son of a pig, you’ll find [the whip] *Ramkanth* sweet [*He whips and kicks him.*]

Torap: Allah! Allah! Oh mother, I’m dying. Uncle Paran, give me a little water, I’m dying of thirst—oh father, oh father.

Rogue: I’ll piss in to your mouth! [*Kicks him.*] (207).

As is his practice, Rogue has his henchmen forcibly deliver Kshetramani to his estate. There she pleads with Rogue’s accomplice Padi, a candy-seller, who, fallen herself, now works to “recruit” native women for Rogue’s pleasure. Padi dismisses her concerns, while Rogue tries to lure Kshetramani to his bed with the promise of a lovely gown “which *bibis* [British ladies] wear” (224). Kshetramani is undeterred—“to hell with a *bibi’s* gown!—and simply asks for a drink of water for she is “dying of thirst”. When Rogue directs her to his pitcher of water, however, she blanches: “I’m a Hindu woman, I don’t touch *saheb’s* water—those musclemen have touched me—first I’ll bath, and only then enter my house” (225). Rogue then sends Padi away and turns violent, dragging her by the hair: “Oh *saheb, saheb*, you’re like my father, I lose my caste if you touch me—let me go, *saheb*, let me go . . . *Saheb, saheb*, my child will die! I beg you *saheb*, my baby’ll die, I’m pregnant” (226). Undeterred, Rogue starts to strip her and reaches for his whip and punches her in the

abdomen, as Kshetramani becomes defiant. Just then two of her comrades, Nabinmadhab and Torap, conveniently burst in and rescue her, chastising Rogue for not being able to control his lust (226-227).

Like Steel, Mitra stops short of describing the sexual penetration of a woman's body, but his rape narrative is designed to outrage especially through the suggestion of unbearable defilement. Kshetramani fears the dishonor that rape visits upon a woman and her family, for as one matriarch declares in the play, "Chastity is gold—a gift from God; a beggar woman's a queen, if she has this treasure" (223). But Kshetramani is also loath to suffer the defilement of physical contact with Rogue, which as she says, will cause her to "lose her caste." The violation of Kshetramani in *The Blue Mirror* plays with the Hindu concept of ritual pollution transmitted through bodily fluids and contact with outcaste or "untouchable" persons. Hence her concern for a purifying bath.

Significantly, she refuses to take water from Rogue though she is thirsty, since even drinking his water is an act that will threaten her caste status, let alone contact with his semen. Kshetramani, in fact, could be ostracized from her community if she were to have even casual contact with Rogue. As a Muslim, Torap, notes in the play, the planters must be "the low-caste people of England" (204). A Hindu matriarch sums up the problem this way: "These monsters can do anything these days—they're snatching away people's land, robbing them of their rice, their cattle, wielding *lathis* (clubs). They're forcing them to sow indigo—though in tears, utterly miserable, they're sowing. And now they've started destroying their caste [by sleeping with innocent women]!" (223). Mitra wrote his play for an Indian audience, and to be sure, the association of Rogue with ritual impurity would not be lost on an Indian audience. The touch of Rogue's polluted hand signifies a moral and spiritual assault on traditional Hindu values coded in the physical violation of a young, pregnant woman. At the same time, it reminds us of the economic exploitation and outright violence that occurred under the indigo system.

The rape narrative in the play is also significant for it forcefully evokes themes from the two Hindu epics, casting the planters as epic villains. It is highly reminiscent of the *Sitaharan* or the abduction of Sita by the demon Ravana in the epic Ramayana. In the fray to rescue Kshetramani, Torap even bites off the nose of Rogue just as the epic hero Lakshmana cuts off the nose (and ears) of the demoness Shurpanakha, prior to Sita's abduction. And, just as Rama is exiled from his kingdom, so too Nabinmadhab proposes a self-imposed exile when faced with unbearable oppression by the planters. But his plan to flee the indigo district is not executed because tragic events intervene. There are other allusions to the Ramayana in the play as well. Once a peasant notes that before they were forced to grow indigo, "this place was like *Rama Rajya*," that is, like the mythical golden age of Lord Rama (189). The two brothers of the well-to-do Basu family, Nabinmadhab and Bindumadhab, are, moreover, virtually Rama and Lakshmana incarnate, in their brotherly devotion, filial piety, and service to their kinsmen. The rape narrative is

also very evocative of another dramatic epic moment, the attempted disrobing of the Draupadi, first by Dushshasana and later, by Kichaka, in the epic Mahabharata. Indeed before rescuing Kshetramani, Nabinmadhab even refers to himself as Bhima: “Father’s Bhima of [the village of] Swarpur is still alive. Yet women are being carried off. To a woman of good family her chastity is her lodestar. I must rush—let me find out that Dushasan. Her chastity, white like a lotus, no indigo-frog will be allowed to pollute!”

In *On the Face of the Waters*, the discursive construction of rape presupposes the fallacy of the widespread torture and rape of European women during the 1857 rebellion. In *The Blue Mirror*, however, rape is not merely a discursive construction, but predicated on the reality of what was likely the relatively commonplace rape of actual Indian women by European planters. In the conjunction of Mitra’s play and the historical circumstances under the indigo system, we can be sure that, to borrow Judith Butler’s phrase, these are “bodies that matter.” In response to allegations of widespread abuses, the colonial government conducted an investigation into the indigo system, issuing a report in 1860, ironically, the same year that *The Blue Mirror* was published. In part, both Mitra’s play and the government report were responses to the indigo riots of 1859-60. Despite the melodramatic tone of *The Blue Mirror* and its Manichean morality, there is an amazing degree of correspondence between the charges levied against the planters in the play and in the 762-page *Report of the Indigo Commission*: rape, murder, bodily harm, willful destruction of property, theft, kidnapping, and forced internment. The authors of *The Report of the Indigo Commission* frankly acknowledge that there have been many allegations of rape directed at indigo planters, but they claim a lack of evidence bars them from considering them credible.⁹ In fact, they conclude that no rapes have been committed. They only consider one case in the report which they dismiss out of hand (*Report* 50-51). A contemporary editor of the report, Pulin Das, explains the commission’s denial of rape this way: “As such the Commission preferred to derive a conclusion relying heavily on the answers mouthed by the alleged offender to the questions cleverly interpolated by Fergusson [a representative of the Planters’ Association] and partially on the Report of Herschel, the officiating Magistrate of Nadia, which admitted the abduction [of women] sans rape”(xi-xii).

While the issue of rape is so central to *The Blue Mirror*, it is swiftly dismissed in the *Report of the Indigo Commission*. It is listed fourth, after murder, violence and destruction of property in the Report’s list of allegations against planters, in descending order of severity. However, according to Das, the “gravest of the charges” levied against planters in

⁹ The five-member indigo commission was meant to be representative of all concerned parties—planters, educated Bengalis, cultivators, and the crown, but included only one Indian, Chunder Mohun Chatterjee, a nephew of Dwarkanath Tagore. A missionary, Reverend Sale, was chosen to represent Indian cultivators.

the report was that of “outrages on women,” a view that is certainly echoed in *The Blue Mirror* (xi). At the heart of all of the charges brought against the planters, was the reality that the indigo system was founded on forced labor, straddling indentured and slave labor, driven by the corruption, violence and greed of the planters. Planters indeed used coercion to force peasants to accept advances to grow indigo and to use more and more of the best arable land for indigo cultivation. Peasants inevitably became hopelessly indebted to planters, who in turn, often cheated them. Despite the inherent melodrama and moralizing in Mitra’s play, the rape narrative in the play is based on historical realities as suggested by the contemporaneous *Report of the Indigo Commission*. And despite Mitra’s explicitly loyalist statements, the play may be read not only as a critique of the class of European planters and the indigo system, but also of the colonial apparatus itself. After all, the colonial government legitimized and fostered the indigo system through protectionist policies and latent collaboration with the planters.

Epic defilement

While *The Blue Mirror* merely alludes to epic narratives to achieve moral force, *Bhima’s Glory* explicitly retells an epic story familiar to an Indian audience. Quite different than its Sanskrit precedents and shot through with Gandhian rhetoric, the play dramatizes rape to describe how India has been besmirched by colonial rule, again drawing on the idea of ritual pollution. The play is representative of a whole body of literature published in the first half of the century, which in the main was comprised of modern retellings of episodes from epic and mythic literature. The epic Mahabharata was especially subject to literary appropriation, even more than the Ramayana. And among episodic treatments of the Mahabharata, those depicting vengeance for affronts to Draupadi’s honor are especially common, not only in Hindi, but also in many regional languages of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Draupadi is violated on a number of occasions in the Sanskrit Mahabharata, most notably when she is wagered and nearly publicly disrobed at a gambling match. The allegorical potential of this figurative rape is not difficult to locate. Treated as property—wagered, unfairly appropriated, and publicly abused—she is easily associated with the land stolen in a dice game by the villainous Kauravas as well as the land appropriated by the British. She is the personification of the Indian nation, pure and noble at heart, but sullied by an alien presence. She represents a nation abused, humiliated and yet defiant. It is left to the hero Bhima to avenge this injustice and slay epic villains figuratively associated with the Raj.

Besides the disrobing scene, another event involving an affront to Draupadi was frequently told in the nationalist period: Kichaka’s attempted rape of Draupadi. Literature on the Kichaka episode abounds in regional literatures from the nationalist period. In Hindi, one of the most well known treatments Maithilisharan Gupta’s *Sairandhri*, a long poem

included in the collection *Tripathaga* (The Confluence of Three Paths, 1927). This rape narrative occurs after the dice incident, though it reenacts on a smaller scale Draupadi's previous humiliation. Here Draupadi and her five husbands are in their thirteenth year of exile, having accepted humble appointments under assumed names in the court of King Virata.¹⁰ It is as a vulnerable handmaiden, "Sairandhri," that Draupadi is nearly raped by the king's lustful brother-in-law, Kichaka. As in *The Blue Mirror* a rape is aborted through the intervention of a noble character, this time Draupadi's husband Bhima. The rape narrative in Chaumuval's play is likewise colored by inflammatory, moralistic rhetoric. After Kichaka reveals that he is "burning in the fires of separation from her [Sairandhri]" and that he is prepared to make a wife out of a slave, Draupadi exclaims, "Fool, a virtuous (*sati*) woman never yields to such temptations! Can a bird that soars through the heavens find respite in a golden cage?" Kichaka continues to entreat Draupadi, begging her to take mercy on him, while Draupadi lectures Kichaka, "Abandon this path of sin and strive to prosper. There can be no deliverance for a man on this path of sin" (*Bhima's Glory* 53). Ultimately her tone becomes more severe as she tells Kichaka that her five husbands will surely kill him. Yet Kichaka chides her, "Calling your husbands divine (*gandharv*), you reveal your fear . . . Go ahead and call your husbands! I won't desist! I'm not afraid of death itself!" (53). As Kichaka grabs her by the clothes, Draupadi pushes him down and flees to a public hall. Kichaka chases her and proceeds to pull her hair and kick her in a scene reminiscent of Duhshasana's humiliation of Draupadi at the dice match. Only now, instead of addressing the Kaurava elders, Draupadi addresses King Virata as she denounces Kichaka: "The injustice! The atrocity! The blasphemy! He brashly grabbed me by the hair and kicked me! The royal court was blinded—is it day or night?" (56). Like the Kaurava elders, Virata is shame-faced by the affront to Draupadi's honor. And as in the Sanskrit Mahabharata, Bhima ultimately slays Kichaka in a dramatic ambush.

While *Bhima's Glory* includes the basic elements of the Sanskrit plot, it also includes many new characters and scenes. And it has a subplot familiar enough in commercial plays of the period, one that satirizes the practice of old men marrying young brides, and the institution of dowry. But what stands out about Chaumuval's play is how he maps Gandhian ideology onto an epic landscape. That is, he links the characters in the play to actual contemporary people in an allegory about the colonial rape of Mother India. The symbolism of Draupadi is obvious. Meanwhile, a cruel and selfish tyrant, Kichaka represents the British viceroy and more generally, the worst of the colonial regime. Ideally he would like Draupadi

¹⁰ This story is told in the *Book of Virata* of the Sanskrit Mahabharata. *Bhima's Glory* follows the Sanskrit Mahabharata, in that Kichaka first coerces his sister (Virata's wife) to send Draupadi to him. When she reluctantly does so, Draupadi manages to escape and then conspires with Bhima to entrap Kichaka. The next time Kichaka goes to meet her again, he encounters not Draupadi, but Bhima who quickly slays him.

to bend to his will, but failing that, attempts to take her by force. In the same way, the English were confronted with the problem of creating “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (*Minute* par. 34). So where the British fell short in creating a class of brown *sahebs* in their likeness through English-style education, they made up for it by imposing their own political administration and social institutions. A new character, the guileless peasant leader Subodh, whose name means “easily understood” fills the role of Gandhi. Even the townspeople of the royal city of Hastinapura are cast in the allegory as they are depicted as revolutionaries (colonial subjects) battling the evil Kichaka (the viceroy) and his corrupt and unjust (colonial) administration. When the agitated townspeople of Hastinapura threaten to revolt, Subodh convinces them to practice non-cooperation. Arrested for publicly denouncing Kichaka, Subodh narrowly escapes execution when Bhima dramatically rescues him from prison. Shortly before Kichaka’s death, the Gandhian figure, Subodh, tells his comrades that the end of the tyrannical administration (*atyachari shasak mandali*) is near. No matter that they lack a strong army—he exhorts them, “Practice non-cooperation (*asahayog*), and don’t extend any support to the unjust administration” (86). All of the events surrounding Subodh are innovations on the original narrative; in Chaumuval’s play, we may see a profound faith in Gandhian ideals.

Like so many other works about Draupadi from the nationalist period, this one associates the heroine’s body with the land of Mother India sullied by an alien hand in a violation that stops short of sexual assault. The horrible injustice of the event is thus related to that of the imperialist project. Here the perpetrator is Kichaka, but elsewhere there are other epic villains, namely Duhshasana and Duryodhana. Beyond the obvious allegory in Chaumuval’s play, *Bhima’s Glory* is also interesting because the attempted rape of the epic heroine Draupadi is presaged by the attempted rape of another character, the villain’s own wife, in another original scene. A spy of Kichaka’s, Durdarshan, stumbles upon Kichaka’s wife, Chandrakala, who is returning from a visit to a goddess temple in the forest. He immediately lusts after the woman, and determines to capitalize on the fact that he is already in disguise. In response to his romantic overtures, Chandrakala calls him a *chandal*, that is, a defiled outcaste in the Hindu social order, and says that she is the wife of a respected general, one who will surely grind his bones to dust!”—this despite the fact, that earlier we see her devastated by her husband’s desire for Draupadi. She continues, “Rogue, do you think that I’m going to subject my pure self to your hateful desires? Impossible!” (72). Just then Durdarshan advances to rape her, but from the wings four “revolutionaries” intervene to rescue Chandrakala now unconscious. One exclaims, “The bastard (*dusht*) is taking a knife to *dharma*! Another retorts, “He’s oppressing virtuous women (*sati*) and bleeding the innocent!” (73). However, before blood can be shed, the Gandhi-esque Subodh arrives and tells the revolutionaries to release Durdarshan, saying he will reap the fruit of his own *karma*.

Opening her eyes, Chandrakala announces that her savior must be a great man, an emissary from God. Subodh's identification with Gandhi is complete as she says, "His nature is so simple, and his form so pure. It's as if an incarnation of *dharma* appeared before me" (73).

In this new episode, the affront to Chandrakala is parallel to the well-known assault on Draupadi while in residence at Virata's court. Only here the victim is more mortal than divine. Yet through her unconditional devotion to Kichaka, and in spite of his utter betrayal of her, Chandrakala is as though elevated to the rank of Draupadi: at once Mother Divine and Mother India. The sanctity of her body is nearly defiled by a man she associates with an impure class of "untouchables." The defiling hand we saw in the outcaste Rogue now appears as the defiling hand of an epic villain's accomplice. There is as though a transference of guilt from British Raj to Kichaka to Durdarshan and a sense of karmic justice: the wife of a would-be rapist is nearly raped herself by his accomplice. An atrocity committed on Chandrakala's sanctified body is not something the four revolutionaries are prepared to bear.

* * *

In all of the rape narratives described above—in the two British novels and in the two Indian plays—physical penetration of the female body as such does not occur. In *On the Face of the Waters*, there are merely allusions to the rape of *memsahabs* in ways that reinforce myths of Indian barbarity and British nobility. In *A Passage to India*, there is the mere allegation of the *intent* to rape a *memsahab* that works to indict the imperialist project in South Asia. And finally in the two Indian plays, sexual violation is coded in scenes of sadistic violence and defilement—by way of reference to or else direct depiction of sexual assault in epic contexts. Significantly, what these works suggest is that rape as a master trope for imperialism operates differently in literature of the colonizers and in literature of the colonized. In the former, whether pro-imperialist or anti-imperialist, the victims are invariably European, while in the latter, they are invariably Indian. But in all cases, the woman's body represents more than mere womanhood. In British texts it is a symbol of all that is supposedly true and right—that which should be fought over. Kate Erlton and her rival Alice Gissing suggest something of the British idealism that could justify the violent suppression of the rebellion. The nobility and purity of an ideal was at stake—that of the "civilizing mission" itself. However, in Forster's novel, that ideal is shown to be a sham, in the muddle of Adela Quested's mind, echoing with the mystery of the Marabar caves. More interestingly, the Indian plays use the trope of rape in insurgent ways, in order to articulate and contest colonial power structures. Female bodies in these texts too represent cherished ideals further associated with a national consciousness. The Indian plays metaphorically equate Indian heroines with the nation in morality tales about imperial sins. Whether semi-divine or human, these heroines are

idealized for their chastity and devotion to their husbands. They are the personification of Mother India, stained by a foreign occupation and nearly stripped of all her bounty. *The Blue Mirror* and *Bhima's Glory* both draw on Indian notions of purity and pollution, and underscore the threat of defilement to the Indian female body. Defilement—the violence of cultural as much as political and economic imperialism—is the threat to the discursive construction of female bodies in these plays.

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