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## Fidelity Afire: British Observations & Theatrical Interpretations of Sati, 1650-1830

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Fidelity Afire: British Observations & Theatrical Interpretations of *Sati*, 1650-1830

By

Abigail Fer

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

History

Minnesota State University, Mankato

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN HISTORY

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO  
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ABSTRACT

What can the shifting British interpretations of sati in the period between 1650 and 1830 tell us about the changes in how the British saw themselves as colonizers? This is the central question that this thesis seeks to resolve. From 1650 to about 1750, British interests in the Indian subcontinent were similar to other Europeans traveling in the area, characterized by the establishment of trading posts and dependence on the governing Mughals. From the beginning of this time period, European travelers were grappling with making sense of the Hindu practice of widow immolation, or sati. Early accounts by French and Italian travelers inferred that while the practice was striking in nature, Europeans had little authority to intervene. Over time, the British in particular were examining the practice within the context of their Protestant moral code. British travelers concluded that *sati* was reprehensible due to brahmins and Mughal governors dictating the fates of Hindu widows as opposed to male heads of household. Through this dismissal of *sati*, we can demonstrate how the British were inadvertently coming to understand themselves as uniquely Protestant colonizers in India as their judgment on widow immolation was informed by their adherence to familial privacy. Dramatists also picked up on this shift in appraisal in contemporary theatrical works on India as British playwrights such as Mariana Starke and W.T. Moncrieff echoed British sentiments that called for the "rescue" of Hindu widows by the British and perhaps the eventual conversion to Christianity.

## Introduction

Her husband dead, soon a ritual may take the life of this young widow. In Thomas Bowrey's travel account of the Coromandel Coast of India in the latter half of the seventeenth century, the writer recalls witnessing the ritual suicide of a young woman following the death of her spouse. The family of the deceased along with Hindu brahmins prepare the funeral pyre to be burned in preparation for a *sati*. The pyre is lit, and it is time for the young girl to sacrifice herself. Bowrey expects the wife to be horrified and reluctant to leap into the flames, but she "Smiled and Said it was the happiest houre that Ever She Saw."<sup>1</sup> The brahmins presiding over the ceremony then gave her something to "intoxicate" herself, and she cheerfully waved her final goodbyes to the crowd and "lookinge Earnestly upon [Bowrey], gave [him] some white and yellow flowrs she tooke from her haire. . . and with Strange nimblenesse Sprange into the fire."<sup>2</sup>

The woman's body burns before Bowrey and the other ceremony attendants' eyes, but instead of being paralyzed with fear, the community bursts into cheerful music with "pipes, drums, trumpets, accompanied with Shouting in Such a measure, that not one Scream of the woman in torment cold be heard."<sup>3</sup> Bowrey is aghast and revolted by the display. Appalled by this treatment of young women at the hands of their own community members, Bowrey concludes, "Oh! horrid destruction! Who can Otherways

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, ed. Sir Richard Carnac Temple (Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint Limited, 1967), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal*, 38

<sup>3</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal*, 38.

imagine but the Devil to be the author of Such base inventions?”<sup>4</sup> However, Bowrey contends that there is “hope” for Hindu women facing the pyre. He recalls that courageous British sailors have “rescued” a young widow and converted her from the patriarchal faith of the brahmins to the noble religion of Christianity.<sup>5</sup> This eventually became the generally accepted attitude of British travelers on *sati* and ritual widow suicide around the Bay of Bengal as writers gained more knowledge on the practice starting around 1650 up until the British East India Company secured a tighter grasp over Bengal with the Battle of Plassey in 1757.<sup>6</sup>

Before this significant battle solidified a more permanent British presence in India, Europeans recorded their travels around the Bay of Bengal in an attempt to create a better understanding of the world around them. Historian Kathleen Wilson contends that this early modern travel helped Britons in particular solidify their own identities as “colonizers” in response to this “other” whom they would label as the “colonized.”<sup>7</sup> This identity permeated gender and religion as travelers came to understand their place within the world using concepts that they had already known.

Travelers were exploring land already inhabited by “Hindu” common people and already colonized by the Muslim Mughals. The early years of the East India Company

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<sup>4</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal*, 40.

<sup>6</sup> There are several instances where European travelers observe a similar practice to *sati* which employs widows burying themselves alive with the bodies of their deceased spouses. This is done in communities that bury their dead as opposed to cremate them. See: John Henry Grose, *A Voyage to the East Indies*, vol. 1 (London, 1772), 227-228; Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2. trans. Valentine Ball (London, 1889), 216; Francois Bernier, *Travels in The Mogul Empire*, vol. 2. trans. Irving Brock (London, 1826), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Wilson, “Introduction: Histories, Empires, Modernities,” in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

(EIC) generated an interesting moment of discovery for the British, Mughals, and Hindus alike. Established in 1600, the EIC was a private company with its efforts focused on economic gain rather than cultural colonization.<sup>8</sup> When EIC traders landed in India, they were met with a powerful empire that had been there for many years: that of the Mughals. The Mughals descended from the ruler Tamerlane in Central Asia and established both a hub of Islam and the Persian language in South Asia with their empire being fairly established by the 1570s. When first coming into contact with the Mughals, the British were only one of many European trading groups fighting for dominance of European supply routes from South Asia and privileged economic connections; they had no real justification to question or challenge Mughal authority.<sup>9</sup> With little political power and motives mostly economic, the EIC and those Europeans who were visiting South Asia in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were attempting to make sense of this new place that sparked feelings of both fascination and fear. However, after the military victories in the 1750s and 1760s and corresponding concessions granted to them by the Mughal emperor, the British changed their imperial philosophy from establishing economic ports with little interference with the lives of the South Asians to a feeling of responsibility to save the native people from their “abusive” and “despotic” former rulers—the Mughals.<sup>10</sup>

The Mughals’ South Asian empire was populated by people practicing religion much differently than them. The term “Hindu” comes from Persian—the language of the

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<sup>8</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 172.

<sup>10</sup> Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 241.



Mughals— and was in wide use before the British used the term, but historians debate whether this term was used to denote someone of a particular religious belief or someone who was simply non-Muslim.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, both the Mughals and British shared a common ambivalence with the “Hindu” practice of *sati*. *Sati* was the practice of Hindu widows burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands to join them in death.<sup>12</sup> Although this was common for Hindus, the Mughals in power attempted several times to abolish the practice, but the exact attitudes that emperors had on Hindu toleration and allowance of *sati* varied with each ruler.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, as Felicity A. Nussbaum has written, the British were more staunch in their abhorrence of the practice, eventually banning it in 1829 when they had political power over much of India.<sup>14</sup> The first part of my study, which covers the years between roughly 1650 and 1750, examines the French, Italian, and eventually British travelers who visited India and published narratives about their experiences there. In between the years 1658 and 1707, the “last great Mughal ruler” Aurangzeb was emperor, and while he was known for his strict adherence to Islam, many European travelers observed widow immolation— something the emperor supposedly “banned.” Many travelers (and even a noted playwright, John Dryden) wrote about this practice during the rule of Aurangzeb and in the fifty years after his death.

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<sup>11</sup> David N. Lorenzen, “Who Invented Hinduism?” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 4 (October 1999): 634-635.

<sup>12</sup> Rekha Misra, *Women in Mughal India (1526-1748 A.D.)* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), 132.

<sup>13</sup> Misra, *Women in Mughal India* 134.

<sup>14</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1995), 169.

Toward the middle decades of the eighteenth century, two major events catapulted the British into greater authority: the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the subsequent assumption of the *diwani*, or tax collection authority, by the British in Bengal (1765). Brian Pennington elaborates on this shifting by noting, “Following the Battle of Plassey, the Company assumed the role of *diwani*, or revenue agent for much of eastern India from the weakening central powers in Delhi, making the British de facto rulers of the region.”<sup>15</sup> In the years following Britain’s victory in the Battle of Plassey, their role in India took a dramatic shift—no longer were they mere interlopers but colonizers who had the power to collect money from their subjects. The latter part of my study thus turns to the late eighteenth century going into the first decades of the nineteenth as the British were pushing for a comprehensive ban on widow immolation. However, the East India Company’s attempt to present itself as more supportive of Hindu practices than the Mughals complicated this push to end *sati* in British-administered territory. Lata Mani notes that during this time the British government in India, headed at first by Governor General Warren Hastings, was gathering authority in the local courts around Bengal: “the Nizamat Adalat—and the superior court—Sadat Nizamat Adalat. Also involved was the Privy Council at the apex of East India Company hierarchy in London.”<sup>16</sup> As the Persian names for these courts indicate, these were institutions the East India Company carried over from the Mughals, and the law administered in them was Mughal law. Mani outlines the turn of events that led to the legislative ban on the practice that started in 1789 with

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<sup>15</sup> Brian Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Lata Mani, “Production of an Official Discourse on ‘Sati’ in Early Nineteenth Century Bengal,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no. 17 (April 1986): 33.

M.H. Brooke, Collector of Shahabad District: “. . .on the strength of its illegality in Calcutta city, Brooke had prohibited the burning of a widow and sought government approval for his decision. The Governor General commended his action but urged him to use private influence rather than official authority in dissuading natives from *sati*.”<sup>17</sup>

While the court did not intervene in the banning of the practice in this particular instance, it set the stage for further complaints throughout the early nineteenth century that eventually led General Lord William Bentinck to formally ban the practice in December of 1829.<sup>18</sup> Alongside this fierce official debate on the British intervention on Hindu religious practices, playwrights in Britain were taking an interest in *sati* as evidenced by the publication of Mariana Starke’s *Widow of Malabar* (1791) and W.T. Moncrieff’s *The Cataract of the Ganges* (1823). These works were bringing the debate on *sati* to a wide British audience, many of whom would never see India. However, these playwrights shaped audiences’ minds on the subject as they rather strikingly echoed the official discourse on *sati* that was taking shape in the East India Company and Privy Council circles.

While historians have established a wealth of research on the British Empire and its various conceptions of gender ideals, I have constructed an analysis examining the emergence of trends in European and British travel narratives and how those trends manifested themselves into theatrical works presented on the British stage throughout this time period. As British people transitioned from temporary, trading visitors to a more

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<sup>17</sup> Mani. “Production of an Official Discourse on ‘Sati,’” 33.

<sup>18</sup> Mani, “Production of an Official Discourse on ‘Sati,’” 33-34.

permanent colonial force, travelers began to understand the lives of the people they would eventually call “Hindu.” Throughout the time period, travelers observed and wrote about widow immolation and sought to conceptualize how it fit within a coherent religious system, even if it would eventually make little sense to group all indigenous non-Muslim Indians into a group called Hindus.

As I analyze these popular, published primary sources, I address the question that lies at the heart of my research: How did changing British interpretations of *sati* reflect how the British learned to see themselves as colonizers? I argue that over the period the British transitioned to a more cautious and eventually unfavorable view of *sati*, and this helped shape British identity as they saw themselves as the ones tasked to “save” Hindu widows from “oppressive” Brahmins while, paradoxically, remaining “tolerant” toward “the Hindu religion” in doing so. I begin to demonstrate this in the first chapter by analyzing how Europeans understood toleration of *sati* by the Mughals to be fairly consistent through Aurangzeb’s reign. However, Europeans, particularly the British, grew increasingly suspicious that Hindu women were not consenting to the practice, and in turn, began to intervene in the practice more frequently over time.

In the second chapter, I focus on British identity at home as Britons were formulating their familial identity as privacy-minded Protestants. However, I add that travelers in India were contributing to this notion as they observed widow immolation. I find that one of the primary objections that British travelers had with *sati* was that it appeared that brahmins were forcing women to mount the pyre when their husbands had no way to consent to the practice. This violated Protestant notions of “the priesthood of

believers,” which posed the male head of household as the one who oversees the religious practice of the entire family.<sup>19</sup> In this way, through their writing of *sati*, Britons were, perhaps unknowingly, coming to understand their own values in seeing how they were “violated” elsewhere.

In the third chapter I switch gears and examine theatrical interpretations which emerged as travel literature was becoming popular in Britain and people began to discuss the goings-on of distant countries. I analyze how Dryden’s play *Aureng-Zebe* represents an older way of thinking about *sati* than later works like Mariana Starke’s *The Widow of Malabar* or W.T. Moncrieff’s *Cataract of the Ganges*. This is because Dryden’s work simply views *sati* as a tragic act unrelated to Hinduism because the widow is Muslim. In addition, there are no British characters to intervene, and while Persians try to dissuade the widow Melesinda from burning herself, Melesinda resolves to commit *sati* without any coercion from religious authorities. On the other hand, Starke and Moncrieff’s plays both outline how British colonizers must “rescue” Hindu women, and in Starke’s case, how the British see themselves as “saving” Hindus by encouraging Christian conversion. These theatrical works show a drastic shift in how British people saw themselves in relation to immolation from passive spectators to “saviors.” The British characters also grapple with their value of toleration in the face of a practice that they do not approve of.

While the scholarly works on widow immolation are numerous, I contribute to the field because I focus on the self-identity of the British as they examined *sati* and how this

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<sup>19</sup> See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977), 111.

identity changed over time—primarily from uninitiated observers to Protestant, “tolerant” colonizers. I use travel narratives and theatrical works to show how India became “real” and salient to British common people as they began to form opinions on a Hindu practice that did not impact them. Over time, as British travelers were coming to understand Hindu traditions as “Hinduism” and gain authority in eastern India, the British subconsciously were shaping their own identities. European travelers had always been shocked by immolation, but through the debate on *sati* as it played out in travelogues and drama, we see a shift in how the British saw themselves fitting into the equation.

Throughout the late seventeenth century, the earlier works of French travelers Francois Bernier and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier constituted a “first” wave of colonial information that captured the European intelligentsia and trickled down to theatrical works that echoed their ideas of the practice of *sati* and how it related (or rather did not relate) to the “religion” of “the Hindoos” or of “the idolators [non-Muslims] of India.”<sup>20</sup> Trends emerged in these early works that later travel writers would emphasize in their works. For example, it became common for Europeans in the later seventeenth century and into the eighteenth to highlight the dubious consent of the widow. Moreover, travelers would play up the two main antagonists of immolations: the wicked brahmin who coerced women into the practice and the governing Mughal bystander who did little to nothing to halt the practice. These trends deepened in severity over time, particularly

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<sup>20</sup> Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, vol. 1. trans. Irving Brock (London, 1826), 4, 14; Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2. trans. Valentine Ball (London, 1889), 209.

with the British writers, and manifested themselves in the theatre depicting *sati* in the later eighteenth century and early nineteenth century.

I contend that the attitudes toward *sati* shifted from the earlier travel works of Bernier and Tavernier (along with the theatrical interpretation of Dryden) as the British, in particular, gathered more information about India and began to conceptualize what Hinduism was and how *sati* did or did not relate to its central principles. With the later theatrical works of Mariana Starke and W.T. Moncrieff, which were informed in part by the British travel works of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries but were also inspired by the official discourse on *sati* that scholars such as Lata Mani have seen taking shape after the 1760s, the British were solidifying their ideas that *sati* was an inauthentic expression of Hinduism and that it was the duty of the British imperial forces to protect young widows from this distortion of their religious practice. This argument lies at the intersection of Mughal, Hindu, British gender, colonial, and travel narrative historiography.

My research on British observations of *sati* is a contribution to the “new imperial history,” along the lines envisioned by contributors to Kathleen Wilson’s 2004 volume bearing that title. Wilson calls for historians to investigate how colonial ventures shaped British identity.<sup>21</sup> While this identity-forming may have been unconscious, the British were coming to understand who they were as they attempted to ban a practice they found reprehensible—so reprehensible that Britons believed that they needed to intervene and

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<sup>21</sup> Kathleen Wilson, “Introduction: Histories, Empires, Modernities,” in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

“save” women. In her famous essay, Gayatri Spivak asserts that through intervening with *sati* British colonizers presented themselves as “white men saving brown women from brown men.”<sup>22</sup> However, I complicate this notion by contending that as the British were forming their identities around the privatization of the family, they found *sati* disgraceful because Hindu women were being oppressed by the “wrong brown men”—brahmins—instead of the “correct patriarchy” of their husbands. Thus, the British saw themselves as white men saving brown women from “the wrong” brown men.

### **Historiography**

The modern historiography of Mughal-era South Asian gender and family relations begins with Rekha Misra’s *Women in the Mughal Empire (1526-1748 A.D.)*, published in 1967. Misra emphasizes differences between largely Muslim Mughal women and the largely Hindu common women. She argues that, traditionally, common women in South Asia played roles within the family to maintain the farm, create weapons used for war like bows, and weave textiles and baskets. During the reign of the Mughals, common Hindu women were increasingly more domestic with a focus on housework and food preparation. Misra also argues that dowries, child marriages, and instances of *sati* rose during the time of Mughal rule.<sup>23</sup>

While providing a foundational text in Mughal-era Muslim and Hindu gender scholarship, Misra’s work has two main concepts that have been questioned in later historiography. First, Misra’s work came about before much scholarly debate had

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<sup>22</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 297.

<sup>23</sup> Misra, *Women in Mughal India*, esp. V, 5, 130-132.



emphasized the concept of Hindu diversity. Since the publication of her book, historians studying Mughal-era Hindu“ism” have questioned the concept of a unified and centralized Hinduism and posited the argument that a uniform set of Hindu practice and belief was an invention of the Europeans who visited South Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>24</sup> Next, the historiography regarding cross-cultural interactions among European and Asian cultures evolved in the twentieth into the twenty-first centuries as historians, starting with Edward Said and his book *Orientalism*, began to problematize European-authored sources as vehicles for constructing a narrative on the experience of either Mughal elites or Brahmin and non-Brahmin Hindus who lived in South Asia in the 1600s and 1700s. Historians have moved toward combining both European and Indian primary sources to create a fuller narrative from the Mughal and Hindu point of view as the British became increasingly entangled in their affairs.

Again, Misra’s work took Hindus, in particular Hindu women, to be a unified group in the early modern period, but recent historiography has strongly challenged the belief that Hinduism should be understood as a unified concept. Wendy Doniger’s *The Hindus: An Alternative History* approaches this issue by contending that there is no universal Hinduism, and many believers have practiced and believed things that are much different than Hindus in other times and places.<sup>25</sup> This argument is also echoed in the works of Will Sweetman and Elaine Fisher.<sup>26</sup> However, Doniger’s work is unique

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<sup>24</sup> Will Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism: ‘Hinduism’ and the Study of Indian Religions, 1600-1776* (Halle: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>26</sup> Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism*, 9; Elaine Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism: Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern South India* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press).

because she amplifies the point that the narrative of Hinduism throughout history has been informed by previously underrepresented groups like women and “the untouchables.”<sup>27</sup> This is distinct from other arguments like Fisher’s *Hindu Pluralism: Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern South India* because Fisher focuses on groups like those who subscribe loosely to Saivism and Vaisnava Hinduism in the early modern period and not on gender and caste differences like women and “the untouchables.” Fisher’s argument coincides with the assertions of Doniger and Sweetman but shifts the focus onto the Hindu people and how they made sense of how their religion was similar or different from others around them as opposed to how outsiders, like the Mughals and British, made sense of the Hindu common people. Fisher argues that Hinduism’s evolution throughout the medieval era was characterized by its diversity in its belief systems and practice. For instance, during the reign of the Mughals, Hindus practiced within communities that had very loose ties of similarity between one another. Although many recognized some difference of Saivism and Vaisnava practice, these differences cannot really be considered the basis for a division of “sects” because this word originated in organizing European religions that were centralized in major beliefs but split into different variations on smaller issues—and in any case, Hindu practice was so diverse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>28</sup> In summary, early modern Hinduism is best characterized to be a set of decentralized community practices with

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<sup>27</sup> Doniger, *The Hindus*, 1-3.

<sup>28</sup> Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism*, 6; 4.

loose subscription to Vedic practice—much different from the very hierarchical and centralized practice of the Roman Catholic or Protestant Churches in Europe.

Will Sweetman's *Mapping Hinduism* applies Doniger's and Fisher's argument concerning Hindu diversity more narrowly to the 1800s and follows this thread through the interactions between British colonizers and South Asian Hindus. He maintains that Hinduism as a concept was invented in the nineteenth century by British colonists and scholars, and, in reality, nineteenth-century Hindus and those who preceded them could not have been considered uniform in either belief or practice.<sup>29</sup> The Europeans sought to unify Indian religion because that was what made sense to them in how they understood the rest of the world religions of which they had established knowledge: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and "Paganism."<sup>30</sup> In this way, Sweetman applies the model of Hindu diversity and answers a question that Doniger and Fisher leave to the side in their research: If Hinduism had been decentralized throughout its history, then why/when/how did many Europeans conceptualize it as a uniform religion like Christianity?

Indeed, central to my study is Europeans', and more specifically Britons' conception of "Hinduism." As noted, religious studies scholars have debated the extent to which this religion fits the mold of an "ism"—with uniform beliefs and practice over a long stretch of time, people, and land. However, historians in the past half century have taken particular interest in investigating how Britons came to understand what Hinduism was and whether the concept of this religion was a creation of British colonizers. In a

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<sup>29</sup> Sweetman. *Mapping Hinduism*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism*, 53.

foundational essay, P.J. Marshall posited that Hinduism was an altogether British invention. While the indigenous people of India had a relatively non-uniform collection of spiritual beliefs and practices, it was the British colonizers in the nineteenth century who categorized these beliefs as the defining doctrines of a religion: Hinduism.<sup>31</sup> More recently, in his book *Was Hinduism Invented?*, Brian Pennington builds upon Marshall's assertion by noting that the years "between 1789 and 1832. . . w[ere] decisive for the development of modern Hinduism, conceived of as a world religion comparable in scope and character to other major faiths, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam."<sup>32</sup> Pennington contends, though, that this does not mean that British people "invented" Hinduism because these assertions tend to "erase Hindu agency and creativity" in favor of excessively bolstering the role of British imperialists.<sup>33</sup> This position offers the important distinction that the British created the idea of Hinduism as a study-able religion, but the beliefs and practices of Hindu people are completely their own.<sup>34</sup> This work serves as an impactful reminder to historians that the idea of Hinduism differs as one focuses on the perspectives of British understanding and Hindu understanding respectively, and one must be cautious not to equate a European interpretation with the objective reality of a religion.

While Sweetman and Pennington take up the question of how Christian Europeans made sense of Hindu religious practice, Indrani Chatterjee focuses her

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<sup>31</sup> P.J. Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in The Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), vii.

<sup>32</sup> Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3-4.

<sup>33</sup> Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*, 5.

research on gender and family practices of South Asians and how religion informed them. Chatterjee asserts that the physical and psychological conceptions of the South Asian family cannot be understood using the same framework used to understand Christian households of Europe.<sup>35</sup> For example, due to the Hindu caste system and patriarchal norms of the time period, enslaved concubines along with wives with either no children or only daughters were referred to using the same term, but what distinguished the wives from the concubines was that the wives were “always identified with a lineage-dynasty and the name of a father, while the slave-others are listed under single names.”<sup>36</sup> While early modern European Christians existed under a patriarchal system that valued sons over daughters, they shared neither polygamy nor this aggregation of women under a similar name. With these kinds of examples, Chatterjee’s work reinforces Sweetman’s concept of how Christians could not understand the norms of South Asian Hindus and Muslims using a European Christian’s framework of “religious” duties.<sup>37</sup> This demonstrates the application of Hindu diversity not only to contend that Hindus were very diverse among themselves, but it also maintains that Hindu family/religious life cannot be understood using the lens of Christianity that embraces a strict uniformity and chain of command in leadership.

Moreover, the historians writing since the rise of postcolonial theory in the 1970s have recognized that European understandings of non-European family and religious life were framed with Christian norms as the benchmark of measurement and in the interest

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<sup>35</sup> Indrani Chatterjee, *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 4, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Chatterjee, *Unfamiliar Relations*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism*, 53.

of asserting that those very European benchmarks should be universal standards. The foundational work on Europeans making sense of Eastern spaces remains Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which explores Europeans' conceptualization of the Middle East. Said argues that Orientalism as a concept was a European invention created in the 1700s that characterized the exotic "other" and shaped how the Europeans envisioned themselves within the world after the Enlightenment period.<sup>38</sup> Whereas Europeans held that "Orientals" were essentially backward and embodied the antithesis of "Western civilization," they correspondingly thought of themselves as intellectually, industrially, and culturally superior.<sup>39</sup> Historians of India have picked up Said's torch of "self versus other" work. Pramod Nayar's ambitious survey of English writing on India from 1600-1920 argues that colonial narratives by English authors can be categorized into separate eras based on the verbiage they used to describe what they discovered around them. Tropes of otherness and proto-colonization began with the first travel narratives written in the 1600s; the English, Nayar contends, were distancing themselves from the marvelous but potentially dangerous region of India. He sees this theme of "marvelous difficulty," which is characterized by explorers displaying courage in the face of the dangerous unknown and attempting to structure it in their work, as continuous in English writing on India through to the later part of the eighteenth century.<sup>40</sup> I extend Nayar's analysis as I agree in his assertion of "marvelous difficulty" but more within the context

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<sup>38</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Pramod K. Nayar, *English Writing and India, 1600-1920: Colonizing Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2008), 6-7, 9. This is displayed through Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime to describe the seemingly indescribable and how the intelligent English were tasked with making meaning of India and communicating this to the rest of the world.

of British bravery in facing *sati* and eventually intervening. This plays out in the dramatic works as British forces appear as courageous “heroes” that “save” Hindu women.

One of the first historians to blend postcolonial analysis with the subject of *sati* is Lata Mani. In her seminal work *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, she asserts that “the debate on *sati* was shaped by a specifically colonial discourse, which simultaneously privileged brahminic scriptures as the locus of authentic tradition and constituted woman as site for the contestation of tradition.”<sup>41</sup> In this argument, she introduces the term “colonial discourse,” which she defines as “the emergence of an interpretive apparatus for apprehending India that acquired specific kinds of force with the shift of the East India Company in the latter half of the eighteenth century from a mercantilist to a territorial power.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, she gives the field a term that encompasses the language colonizers used as they were coming to understand India and eventually gaining power to administer it. I extend Mani’s analysis to apply the concept of “colonial discourse” to travel narratives alongside theatrical works in order to gauge change in colonial discourse over time as Britons were gaining authority.

Where Mani extends, though also nuances, Saidian colonial discourse analysis to the Indian context for the early nineteenth century, Rahul Sapsra pushes against Said by contending that British colonizers of the seventeenth century did not characterize all Indian people as uncivilized/barbaric “others.” The English made numerous distinctions, most importantly between the Hindus and the Muslims. Most poignantly, Sapsra notes that

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<sup>41</sup> Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on ‘Sati’ in Colonial India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, 4.

in the seventeenth century the British saw themselves relating to the Mughals as they both were “outsiders” to the country and were “defined in opposition to the Hindus.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in her work on how the British made sense of South Asian gender norms, Pompa Banerjee makes an interesting parallel between the Mughal-era South Asian practice of *sati* and the common early modern European practice of witch burning. Banerjee argues that European travel narratives that depicted *sati* were informed by the forms of gendered “ritualized violence” that they were already familiar with: namely, witch burning.<sup>44</sup> European travelers did not necessarily see the similarities between the two categories of gender-based violence with fire, but Banerjee suggests that their unconscious association of them as “traditional” practices laid groundwork for the creation of the female body as the symbol of European conceptions of gender and empire.<sup>45</sup> British travelers like Alexander Hamilton (1762-1824) connected Hinduism and *sati* to concepts of older, medieval religion that they already knew, such as the “Great Chain of Being,” which was a common way to organize people in Christianity.<sup>46</sup> This work demonstrates a new perspective in how historians can approach “self versus other” because Banerjee reveals a similar practice in European culture, not a binary opposition of the sort Said would lead us to expect.

Following Sapra and Banerjee, other researchers interested in complicating Said’s thesis include David Hammerbeck who discusses French theatre that was inspired by

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<sup>43</sup> Rabul Sapra, *The Limits of Orientalism: Seventeenth-Century Representations of India* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>44</sup> Pompa Banerjee, *Burning Women: Widows, Witches, and Early Modern European Travelers in India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Banerjee, *Burning Women*, 4-5.

<sup>46</sup> Banerjee, *Burning Women*, 80.



travel writing in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Hammerbeck contends that the French theatrical work of playwrights Joseph Audé and Eugène Scribe on *sati* did not cast the French as morally or religiously superior to Hindus. He states, “The final outcome is ambiguous, one where *sati* is merely business [that the French do not interfere in], where Indian men and French men can find a common ground.”<sup>47</sup>

Hammerbeck’s work demonstrates that theatre, as well as travel literature, can be used to test out Said’s thesis. Surprisingly, given the relatively marginal French imperial impact in India as compared to Britain’s, French plays involving *sati* have received more attention of this kind from scholars than British ones, with the possible exception of Dryden’s *Aureng-Zebe*. My third chapter takes steps toward righting this historiographical imbalance.

With the foundation that Said established in maintaining that Orientalist discourse “feminized” the East, several historians and literary scholars have examined European travel narratives with a focus on gender. Felicity Nussbaum argues in her book *Torrid Zones* that, in the years following the Enlightenment, English colonizers created various interpretations of “non-Western” backwardness through stories that displayed white men as colonizing “saviors” and white women as the protected inheritors of colonial gains such as the increased economic commodities coming to Europe.<sup>48</sup> This assertion complicates the imperialist narrative and acknowledges intersectionality in a way that sheds light on European women and their figuration in imperialist ideology while existing

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<sup>47</sup> David Hammerbeck, “India on My Mind: French Theatre, Enlightenment Orientalism and The Burning Widow,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (January 2014): 60.

<sup>48</sup> Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones*, 13.

under a patriarchy. Jenny Sharpe's work goes hand-in-hand with Nussbaum's, but instead of doing a general review of Europeans observing the gender relations of non-Europeans, Sharpe puts a spotlight on the British conceptualizing sexual violence in the aftermath of the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857. Sharpe argues that stories about the rebellion highlighted atrocities against British families and characterized Indian men as uncontrollable in their capabilities of both physical and sexual violence. She also asserts that after the rebellion women's bodies became colonial symbols to be preserved from sexual assault, in the case of white women, and *sati* where Indian women were concerned.<sup>49</sup> Sharpe continues this trope of "self versus other" that has been established by Edward Said, but Sharpe focuses on gender-based violence and its symbolism to show how the British justified their sense of moral superiority.

### Sources

As I have written this thesis amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I was severely limited in my access to primary sources. With many archives closed for the duration of my master's degree, I relied heavily on Google Books digitizations to access travel accounts, play scripts, and reviews. It is important to note that these travel books are not necessarily sources of the truth on *sati*, but this is not the aim of my study. Rather, I am trying to understand the change over time in how the British understood and wrote about *sati* in two distinct media: travel literature and drama. Travel literature was used as a common form of entertainment, with many writers competing for attention and revenue,

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<sup>49</sup> Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 4-9.

and was therefore known not always to be factual at the time it was written.<sup>50</sup> The same is true for theatrical works, which were purely fictitious, but perhaps the audiences were unsure about which parts of the plays were based in “truth” and which were pure fabrications of the playwright’s imaginations. Nevertheless, these unreliable sources are crucial to analyze because they helped form the minds of people in Britain who would never see India, and because of this fact, these readers or audience members would not be able to check whether what they were reading or seeing was accurate. These consumers of media were creating a schema within their own minds about concepts like “India,” “Hinduism,” and “*sati*” that were shaped by a number of unreliable sources; these distorted interpretations became “reality” in the minds of the people who could not check their facts.

The primary sources for this project come in four main forms: sources from a Persianate author on widow immolation, sources from European travelers and their interpretations of widow immolation, British plays that use *sati* as a plot device, and contemporary reviews of these plays. The chronological scope of the travel literature ranges from roughly 1650 with the beginning of the reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb to about the 1750s with the Battle of Plassey about fifty years after the emperor’s death. The theatrical works I use begin with John Dryden’s play *Aureng-Zebe* (1676), which drew from a limited base of European travel works. I then analyze Mariana Starke’s *The Widow of Malabar* (1791) and W.T Moncrieff’s *The Cataract of the Ganges*

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<sup>50</sup> Andrea Major, *Pious Flames: European Encounters with Sati, 1500-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72.

(1823), which were both written much later in the period when a greater wealth of travel writing, but also published EIC correspondence, government-sponsored scholarship, and excerpts from English-language newspapers and magazines printed in British India, would be available for them to draw upon.

In my first two chapters, I use Zoroastrian writer Mirza Zu'lficar Sasani's *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, to serve as a foil against European accounts for analysis of Hinduism and *sati*. Historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam reveals that Sasani, alive during the middle of the seventeenth century, was a wanderer who sought to understand the religions of the world around him such as Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. He sought this information out by reading religious texts in order to find the origins of both belief and practice.<sup>51</sup> There are relatively few translated Persianate sources that discuss *sati* as there is little commentary on *sati* found in the translated biographies of Mughal emperors such as the *Akbarnama* or *Fatawa Alamgiri*, but Sasani's work is unique because he does not attempt to assert his own opinion about Hinduism while discussing its beliefs and practices. Rather, he explains practices by relating them to Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Although they did not have access to translated Persian sources such as the *Dabistan* until the early 1800s, it is crucial to note that the travel narratives that the British consumed were not necessarily British-authored. Some works written by fellow Europeans that were translated quickly into English retained influence upon later

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<sup>51</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Europe's India: Words, People, Empires, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 139-140.

travelers' impressions and authorial techniques. French and Italian travelers' writings about India made up a crucial part of the corpus of British and, more broadly, European knowledge of the subcontinent.<sup>52</sup> For example, Francois Bernier (1620-1688) was a prominent French travel writer of the period who authored *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656-1668* (1671). Trained as a medical doctor, Bernier traveled the world, including Poland, Egypt, and India. In the Mughal Empire, he worked as a physician under a prominent court official: Aga Danechmend Khan. He eventually wrote about his experiences in the Mughal court and disseminated them throughout Europe, where his book drew a wide audience and introduced the popular concept of "Oriental Despotism."<sup>53</sup>

Bernier's contemporary Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689) published an equally popular book of *Travels in India* in 1676; this book appeared almost immediately in English translation, as well. Tavernier was a French explorer and merchant who traveled throughout Asia but had a special interest in India. While getting information for his travel writings, Tavernier turned his focus to precious gems as he became a prominent expert in the topic through his travels.<sup>54</sup> Another important non-British traveler was Niccolao Manucci, who, like Bernier, was a physician. Manucci traveled around the Bengal region between the years 1653 and 1708 during the entirety of emperor Aurangzeb's rule. Unlike Bernier, however, Manucci worked alongside the emperor's

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<sup>52</sup> Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Oriental Despotism and European Orientalism: Botero to Montesquieu," *Journal of Early Modern History* 9, nos. 1-2 (June 2005): 109-80.

<sup>53</sup> Siep Stuurman, "Francois Bernier and the Invention of Racial Classification," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 50 (2000): 1.

<sup>54</sup> Harish Kapur, *Jean-Baptiste Tavernier: A Life* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013), 1.

brother Dara Shiko and eventually traveled around the region after the prince's death in 1659.<sup>55</sup>

One of the earlier British travelers to write about his ventures in the Bengal region was Thomas Bowrey (?-1713?), who had read French travel accounts like those of Bernier along with works of Mughal history.<sup>56</sup> He lived in Madras at Fort Saint George starting around the year 1669 and worked in the Royal Navy and most likely as a private merchant throughout his stay in India.<sup>57</sup> In the late 1680s, Bowrey returned to England and wrote travel literature along with *A Dictionary of English and Malayo* (1701) before his death most likely in 1713.<sup>58</sup> Writing around the same time as Bowrey was physician John Fryer (?-1733), who was schooled in medicine and traveled to India in between the years 1672 and 1682. Upon his return to England, he worked to publish his travels along with translating the works of French travelers into English.<sup>59</sup> His travel work *A New Account of East India and Persia, in Eight Letters*, published in 1698, was subsequently translated into Dutch to reach a wider, international audience.<sup>60</sup>

Thomas Salmon (1679-1767) was another British traveler whose works were widely read in the time period. Throughout his life, he is said to have traveled across Europe and spent a number of years in India and the West Indies. His world travel

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<sup>55</sup> Niccolao Manucci, *A Pepys of Mogul India, 1653-1708*, trans. William Irvine (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1913), iii.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, ed. Sir Richard Carnac Temple (Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint Limited, 1967), xviii.

<sup>57</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal*, xxiv;xxvi.

<sup>58</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal*, xix, xliii-xliv.

<sup>59</sup> "Fryer, John, M.D. (d. 1672)," in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 20, ed. Leslie Stephen (New York, NY, 1889), 302-303.

<sup>60</sup> "Fryer, John, M.D. (d. 1672)," 303.

inspired many of his works as he wrote about the history and geography of countries near and far with publications such as *A Review of the History of England* (1722), *The Chronological Historian* (1733), and *Modern History, the Present State of All Nations* (1739).<sup>61</sup> Chronologically, the final English traveler I investigate is merchant Alexander Hamilton, who visited India between 1688 and 1723 and wrote about his ventures in his *New Account of the East Indies* (1727). The Victorian first edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* boasted of this work's merit as a compelling and relatively accurate history rivaling that of Herodotus when he visited India millennia before.<sup>62</sup>

### Plays

In the final chapter I examine three prominent plays of this time period that include *sati* and how it played out in the imaginations of travelers and playwrights alike. The first prominent play that I investigate is *Aureng-Zebe* (1676) by John Dryden (1631-1700). Famous English poet John Dryden began writing plays in the 1660s with works such as *The Indian Queen* (1664) and *The Indian Emperor* (1665), which took place in Latin America.<sup>63</sup> However, he set his eyes to South Asia in his final play in verse *Aureng-Zebe* (1676), which the original edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* asserted was his best play and was even read by Charles II before it was officially published.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps the most impactful fact about this work was that it was published while the

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<sup>61</sup> "Salmon, Thomas (1679-1767)." in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 50. ed. Leslie Stephen (London, 1897), 208.

<sup>62</sup> "Hamilton, Alexander (d.1732)." in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 24. ed. Leslie Stephen (London, 1890), 133.

<sup>63</sup> "Dryden, John (1631-1700)." in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 16. ed. Leslie Stephen (London, 1888), 65.

<sup>64</sup> "Dryden, John (1631-1700)," 67.

Mughal emperor Aurangzeb was still living. In fact, the play was only published around 20 years after the ruler's rise to power, the story of which serves as inspiration for the work.

Prominent playwrights from later in the period explored in this thesis include female playwright Mariana Starke (1762?-1838), who spent her childhood in Madras as her father held a governorship there in Fort Saint George. Starke wrote two plays about India, the first being *The Sword of Peace, or A Voyage of Love* (1788) and the second being *The Widow of Malabar* (1791). Although in this project I put authors into the categories of travel writer or playwright, Starke qualifies as both as later in life she chronicled her travels in works such as *Letters from Italy* (1815) and *Travels on the Continent* (1824).<sup>65</sup> The most recent dramatist I examine is W.T. Moncrieff (1794-1857), the author of *The Cataract of the Ganges* (1823). While Moncrieff gained some popularity for composing music, he is best known for writing over 170 plays, *The Cataract of the Ganges* being the most famous.<sup>66</sup>

## Chapter Outline

The first chapter investigates the patterns surrounding *sati* that were recorded by seventeenth-and eighteenth-century European travelers as compared to the observations of the Persiante author Mirza Zul'fiqar Sasani. I examine emerging patterns in travel writing from the rise of emperor Aurangzeb to the Mughal throne in the 1650s to the

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<sup>65</sup> "Starke, Mariana (1762?-1838)." in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 54. ed. Leslie Stephen (London, 1898), 107.

<sup>66</sup> "Moncrieff, William Thomas (1794-1857)." in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 38. ed. Leslie Stephen. (New York, NY, 1894), 171-173.



Battle of Plassey and the establishment of a more permanent British presence in India in the 1750s. After investigating the historiography of the Mughal accommodation of Hindu practices within an officially Muslim empire, I assert that the writers of the period observed a consistency in Mughal toleration of the practice of *sati* in the time period, but the authors accounted for this toleration in varying ways over time. The most striking pattern over this time period was that travelers were becoming increasingly suspicious of the widow's consent, which led to the final major trend of the period: the proliferation of *sati* "rescue" being depicted in travel works.

My second chapter inspects European travel writing strictly under the lens of intervention. What was the British thought process, as demonstrated in travelogues, that brought travelers to believe that it was their duty to intervene in cases of *sati*? In this way, I trace how the British came to understand the concept of "marital fidelity" within the context of Hindu marriage in a way that overread Hindu marital vows as a woman's complete surrender of her autonomy not so much to her husband as to the community that enforced *sati*. I use Sasani's *Dabistan* to compare how authors from different backgrounds came to understand the spiritual justifications for *sati* differently and how the British imposed their view of a "correct" marriage as they celebrated or wished for the rescue of *satis* from the pyre (or, more broadly, from the custom altogether).

The final chapter examines the afterlife of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel writing as it fired the imaginations of playwrights, who created theatrical representations of *sati* that reached common people who would likely never see India firsthand. In this chapter, I show that earlier plays such as Dryden's *Aureng-Zebe*, despite

being based on the travel works of Bernier and Tavernier (both of whom clearly pegged *sati* to Hindu “idolatry” and/or “paganism”<sup>67</sup>), displayed a more limited understanding of *sati* and how it related to Hinduism. Dryden incorrectly associated *sati* with Islam or perhaps more broadly saw it as an all-India custom, but it is clear that he did not consider the practice as inherently Hindu. However, as more British travelers published their travel works, and as documentation circulated more widely of official debates over whether the EIC government should safeguard or restrict *sati*, playwrights such as Mariana Starke and W.T Moncrieff included immolation in their own works, but a marked shift arose in how these dramatists portrayed *sati* and its fit within Hindu belief and practice. In these later works, playwrights, in addition to following trends found in travel narratives, echoed British administrators and scholars who were separating the practice of *sati* from what they saw as “authentic” Hinduism. In their plays, dramatists such as Starke and Moncrieff posed young Hindus and British military forces forging heroic coalitions to resist the authority of older Hindu Brahmins and break their “hollow” (meaning theologically void) “tradition,” which they found incompatible with what they considered “authentic,” orthodox Hindu religion.

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<sup>67</sup> On Bernier’s and Tavernier’s ways of suggesting that *sati* was a distinctively Hindu religious custom, see again note 13 above; on paganism/idolatry as the “fourth” and only other recognized religion aside from the Abrahamic trio of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, see again Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism*, 53 (as cited in note 31).

**Chapter 1: Crafting a Proto-Colonial Discourse: Patterns of Toleration,  
Consent and “Rescue” of *Satis* in Aurangzeb’s Bengal**

In setting out the narrative that her own work seeks to overturn, historian Audrey Truschke recounts the seemingly barbarous legacy of the Mughal Empire’s most notorious zealot, the emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707). Historians of the past have characterized him as the blood-thirsty destroyer of thousands of Hindu temples throughout his reign, a steady menace to those who Europeans would call “Hindu.”<sup>68</sup> Aurangzeb officially banned the Hindu practice of widow self-immolation or *sati* in 1664.<sup>69</sup> According to this kind of evidence, one might surmise that the reign of Aurangzeb spelled disaster for the Hindu common people’s religious freedom, which had included prior toleration by the Mughals of the practice of *sati*. However, could the region of Bengal, distant from the Mughal capital and at the fringes of the reach of Mughal law, prove to be an exception to Aurangzeb’s rule? Additionally, according to travelers both European and Persianate, was there consistency in their depictions of this practice, and what changed over time?

Contemporary historians like Truschke have put the traditional assertion that Aurangzeb’s underlings were intolerant toward Hindus in Mughal Bengal into serious question. Shah Noorur Rahman contends that there is no evidence that Aurangzeb oppressed Hindus in Bengal throughout his reign.<sup>70</sup> Richard Eaton offers a succinct

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<sup>68</sup> Audrey Truschke, *Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India’s Most Controversial King* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 8.

<sup>69</sup> S.M. Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, ed. Ainslie T. Embree (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1969), 189.

<sup>70</sup> Shah Noorur Rahman, *Hindu-Muslim relations in Mughal Bengal* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2001), 23.

explanation for why no such oppression could have occurred even if Aurangzeb had wanted it to. Simply put, Bengal's position at the periphery of the Mughal Empire allowed for a distinct and robust blending of Muslim belief along with indigenous ways of life.<sup>71</sup> In this chapter, I show that the de facto religious tolerance (of *sati* and "Hindu" religious practices) that existed in Aurangzeb's Bengal was communicated differently (and assumed to stem from different motives) by different writers from different backgrounds writing in this time period. These authors varied from one Zoroastrian Persianate thinker—Mirza Zu'lfikar Sasani—to an Italian, two Frenchmen, and an assortment of Britons. As Aurangzeb's reign came to a close and in its aftermath, European and British authors alike attributed Mughal authorities' religious tolerance to different reasons, such as toleration (and the paying for a religious license) being a source of revenue for the empire or religious principle, which had been noted by earlier travelers such as Francois Bernier.

Depictions of *sati* also changed over time, with noticeably growing suspicion on the part of British authors that Hindu women were not consenting to the practice toward the end of the time period. Authors across the board came to address the concept of a woman's consent, or lack thereof, in their own depictions of the ritual ranging from citing similar instances in Hindu epics to witnessing the use of intoxicating substances or forceful violence employed within the practice. Although the Persianate account—*The Dabistan*—did not explicitly discuss consent, French and Italian writers grew increasingly

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), xxxvi.

interested in the topic as they asserted that women largely had voluntarily chosen to immolate themselves. British writers toward the end of the period came to question this. There was a subtle change over time as British authors visited Bengal in greater numbers, but their suspicions regarding widows' consent to commit *sati* began in earnest with the writing of Thomas Bowrey who visited Coromandel and Bengal between the years 1669-1679. These suspicions intensified in the writings of Thomas Salmon and Alexander Hamilton, produced in the 1720s and 1740s, respectively. However, what remains consistent through the investigated accounts between 1650 and a few decades after Aurangzeb's death is that provincial Mughal governors largely allowed the practice to persist despite their disapproval of it.

Suspicion over the consent of Hindu women and the ulterior motives of governors who allowed the practice of *sati* came to trouble Europeans so much that there was an increasing movement to intervene and "save" these women from their religious patriarchal "oppressors." Through this, they were in fact assuming that widows were not consenting to the practice and needed a choice to be made for them. As we will explore, over time the British travelers increasingly discussed *sati* rescue and the eventual inclusion of some Hindu widows in their own communities. This shows that the ways that Europeans were reacting to *sati* transitioned from passive disapproval to the desire to intervene and find ways for Hindu women to live outside of their communities.

This chapter is about the messy process of travelers making sense of the Hindus and Muslims they saw before them, and through this analysis, Europeans were beginning to explore how they fit within these dynamics by way of *sati* "rescue." The chapter

suggests that these early European travel writers in particular were creating a proto-colonial “reality” in which they could see themselves reforming native Indian morals to conform with Christian European ones. At this time, we cannot use the word colonial quite yet because Europeans did not gain more substantial and permanent authority over Indian people until later. This lack of authority allowed Europeans to explore and “discover” Indian religions for themselves. This is demonstrated in the varying views travelers had for Mughal tolerance for Hindu practices such as *sati*. These theories became “real” in the minds of travelers as many began to doubt women consented to *sati*, so they proceeded to take action with the limited information they had on Hindu religious practice.

### **Blended Identities in Mughal Bengal**

Starting in the 1960s, the recent historiography of early modern India has taken a deliberate turn away from previous scholarship by questioning the previously long-held notion that Hindus and Muslims were both religiously distinct and diametrically opposed to one another. This becomes particularly interesting in the case of Emperor Aurangzeb and Mughal Bengal. Although the ruler’s ideology and actions seemingly were strictly anti-Hindu, the deeds of the emperor have been seen within historical contexts that soften the harsh condemnation of the ruler that was established by earlier historians.

Contemporary historians also elevate Mughal Bengal as a region of interest, particularly in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth, as the region came to signify a place of greater religious diversity than previous researchers had imagined.

The historiography of Hindu-Muslim relations in this period begins with the work of historians S.M. Ikram and Richard Eaton. Both of their works dispel previous arguments emphasizing Mughal religious intolerance in favor of demonstrating a more complex religious review of the Mughal empire and complicating of the terms “Hindu” and “Muslim”. Ikram argues that, especially in Bengal, Muslims and Hindus coexisted more peacefully than other historians have previously understood. Both religions interacted and informed one another, with Bengali Muslims adopting practices such as “early marriages and of the objection to widow remarriage. Some ceremonies connected with births, deaths, and marriages may also be traced to Hindu origin.”<sup>72</sup> He also contends that although many historians have understood Aurangzeb to be a religious zealot forcing Islamic values onto his subjects, in reality these policies were difficult to enforce on the periphery of his empire due to whom he appointed to govern the various regions of his empire. Aurangzeb employed more Hindus in positions of power than any other Mughal ruler before him, which may well have come into play when Hindus asked provincial governors for permission to commit *sati*.<sup>73</sup> Factors such as Bengal’s remoteness and the overlapping identities of Hindus who were the faces of Mughal authority in the provinces may not have been on the minds of British travelers, but this was the reality as to why Aurangzeb did not oppress Hindus in Bengal.

Richard Eaton’s major work on *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* underscores Ikram’s observation that Bengal was a borderland. He dispels the notion of a

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<sup>72</sup> Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, 124-131, at 131.

<sup>73</sup> Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, 199.

harsh divide between non-Muslim and Muslim in this period by revealing that historians have primarily used the term to denote the largely Muslim Mughal ruling class and the common people “who were assumed to be non-Muslim.”<sup>74</sup> In reality, blurred distinctions between religious groups gave common people more room for toleration of their religious practice. For example, Eaton explores how the creation of mosques and Muslim religious circles in eastern Bengal in the late 1700s and early 1800s was not intended to facilitate a rapid “conversion” of the common people to Islam. Rather, Eaton emphasizes that the term “conversion” should not be used in the case of the “Islamization” of the Bengal frontier because “it ordinarily connotes a sudden and total transformation in which a religious identity is wholly rejected and replaced by a new one.”<sup>75</sup> In contrast, the spread of Islamic ideas in Bengal was a “social phenomenon” that did not require such ideological harshness.<sup>76</sup> Both Ikram and Eaton complicate the narrative on Aurangzeb and recognize that Bengal stood apart from other regions within the empire due to its remoteness from the Mughal capital of Agra even though the British were relatively unaware of this phenomenon.

Researchers in the twenty-first century have continued to see the religious lines in early modern Bengal as blurred and have sought to better understand the interactions between “Hindus” and “Muslims.” Shah Noorur Rahman, focusing heavily on marriage norms in and among Hindus and Muslims in his work *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Mughal Bengal*, contends that Hindus and Muslims were much more tolerant of each

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<sup>74</sup> Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), xxiv.

<sup>75</sup> Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, 269.

<sup>76</sup> Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, 268-269.



other than previously understood.<sup>77</sup> For instance, intermarriage was common in Bengal—particularly because Muslim men settled there typically without wives or families.

Rahman does note that intermarriage between a Muslim man and a Hindu woman was seen as “a symbol of victory of Islam and extreme insult to Hindus.” However, this triumphal feeling was not always present in practice because he asserts that Bengal Hindu women did not always convert to Islam after marriage, and if they did, they retained many of their Hindu beliefs and practices.<sup>78</sup>

Sushil Mittal’s *Surprising Bedfellows: Hindus and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern India* builds on this by acknowledging “a more complicated sphere of interaction, convergence, and fluidity than present terminology and scholarship often acknowledges.” For example, he asserts that scholars should not use terms like “Hindu,” “Muslim,” or “Islam” because they carry presuppositions that were not present in early modern India.<sup>79</sup> Historian Stewart Gordon’s contribution to *Surprising Bedfellows* reflects on the concept of “otherness” and concludes that historians must focus on the cultural “meditation” or “likeness” between the ideas of “Hinduism” and “Islam” because these two concepts were not mutually exclusive.<sup>80</sup> He concludes that the concepts of “self” and “other” that many historians use when studying European perceptions of India did not apply among different religious groups within the Mughal empire. Politics were

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<sup>77</sup> Rahman, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Mughal Bengal*, vii.

<sup>78</sup> Rahman, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Mughal Bengal*, 35-36, at 35.

<sup>79</sup> Sushil Mittal, ed., *Surprising Bedfellows: Hindus and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern India* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 8.

<sup>80</sup> Stewart Gordon, “Hindus, Muslims, and the Other in Eighteenth Century India,” in *Surprising Bedfellows*, ed. Sushil Mittal (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 14.

not uniform along religious lines, and no polity was exclusively Hindu or Muslim.<sup>81</sup> It makes sense that Europeans may have thought of them as so because the Thirty Years' War was fresh on the minds of travelers who visited India in the early modern period, and this war tore Europe apart on Catholic and Protestant lines, which they saw as irreconcilable.<sup>82</sup> However, this was not the case in early modern India because religious communities were not consistent in allying themselves or trading exclusively with members of the same religion.<sup>83</sup>

With modern scholars having emphasized this reality of blurred identity boundaries in Mughal Bengal, it makes sense to ask whether recognition of this fluidity entered into travelers' accounts for why toleration of *sati* was the norm in Aurnagzeb's Bengal. Also, what further explanations did these writers offer for the persistent prevalence of *sati* in Bengal beyond the time of Aurangzeb's official prohibition of it? It is to these questions that this chapter now turns.

### **Accounting for Toleration**

One of the main changes over time regarding travelers' accounting for religious toleration is that over the period, travelers paid increasing attention to why the Mughals tolerated Hindu practices, including *sati*. At the beginning of the period, Persian writer Mirza Zu'fiqar Sasani, who was writing about Hindu practices in the middle of the

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<sup>81</sup> Gordon, "Hindus, Muslims, and the Other in Eighteenth Century India," 23, 25.

<sup>82</sup> Gordon, "Hindus, Muslims, and the Other in Eighteenth Century India," 14.

<sup>83</sup> Gordon, "Hindus, Muslims, and the Other in Eighteenth Century India," 16. Gordon explores this concept by reading Maratha documents in the 1700s from their strongholds in newly-acquired Burhanpur and Khandesh. What he found was that when the Marathas had taken these provinces they did not set up discriminatory policies against Muslim residents. Rather, many Muslims retained favorable economic ties that they had under Mughal rule. (Gordon, "Hindus, Muslims, and the Other in Eighteenth Century India," 18).

seventeenth century, noted how while the government may have been Muslim in name, they were fairly tolerant Hindus and their practices. The *Dabistan*'s references to contemporary instances of *sati* reveal that Sasani was able to observe such instances, among other Hindu practices, with great frequency in the time he was compiling his work, and he does not mention any ban of this practice coming into place in his description of *sati*. However, he does note that "it is however criminal to force the woman into the fire, and equally so to prevent her who voluntarily devotes herself."<sup>84</sup> This quotation acknowledges that a woman's consent is at the heart of the practice because the ritual is tolerated, but it cannot be forced upon someone.

Writing around the same time as Sasani were the Frenchmen Bernier and Tavernier—along with Italian traveler Niccolao Manucci. These writers paid closer attention to religious toleration as a whole as evidenced by an explicit discussion as to how the Mughals allowed for Hindus to practice *sati*. Bernier recounts an instance of river bathing by noting that "the Great Mogul, though a muselman, permits these ancient and superstitious practices; not wishing, or not daring, to disturb the pagans in the free exercises of their religion."<sup>85</sup> However, Bernier acknowledges that the Mughals had attempted to snuff out widow immolation, but they struggled as they walked a fine line between disapproving of a practice and wanting to preserve religious freedom for those who practiced differently from them. He concludes, "No woman can sacrifice herself without permission from the governor of the province in which she resides."<sup>86</sup> He notes

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<sup>84</sup> *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, vol. 2. trans. David Shea and Anthony Troyer (London, 1843), 76.

<sup>85</sup> Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, vol. 1. trans. Irving Brock (London, 1826), 4.

<sup>86</sup> Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, vol. 1, 8-9.

that even if a governor is Muslim, they do allow women to partake in this practice, but Hindu governors are much more willing to grant permission.<sup>87</sup> In this way, he accounts for religious tolerance by discussing the role of the provincial governor and the struggle to allow the practice of *sati* to happen, although the Mughals largely did not approve.

Manucci and Tavernier went a step further than Bernier and introduced the idea of Hindus paying Mughal governors for permission to practice their religion. Manucci, for instance, describes the practice of ritual bathing among Hindu people by the river Tirth (a small body of water “flowing in the middle of the waters of the two rivers, Ganges and Jamnah”) and notes, “Every five years multitudes of Hindus assemble and wash their bodies in the said stream. This yields a good revenue to the Mogul king, for every person who bathes in the river pays six and a quarter rupees.”<sup>88</sup> In a similar vein to Manucci’s acknowledgement that the Mughals profit from granting permission to undertake this practice and therefore indirectly support this ritual, Tavernier examines payment to commit *sati* in the form of bribes given to Mughal governors. He notes that it was particularly difficult for a woman to convince a Muslim governor to permit her undergo the practice, but if a woman was persistent in her urging and offered a sum of money to the official, she was typically allowed to proceed with the ceremony.<sup>89</sup> These European writers were creating a “reality” of toleration that was relatively overlooked in the work of Sasani. While Bernier’s reality outlined the Mughal premium on the tolerance in

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<sup>87</sup> Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, vol. 1, 9.

<sup>88</sup> Niccolao Manucci, *A Pepys of Mogul India, 1653-1708*, trans. William Irvine (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1913), 113.

<sup>89</sup> Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, trans. Valentine Ball (London, 1889), 210-211.

principle, Tavernier and Manucci crafted a different schema that asserted that the Mughals had a financial motive.

As British travelers came to India in increasing numbers, they also began to take note of Mughal toleration for Hindu practices such as widow immolation. Thomas Bowrey, like Manucci, and Tavernier, accounted for Mughal officials' religious tolerance by revealing the use of expensive religious licenses that may have dissuaded widows of lower classes. He suggested that Hindus "doe annually purchase their freedome of their heathenish laws, and Diabolicall customes, with noe Small Summs of moneys."<sup>90</sup> Later English traveler, Alexander Hamilton, however, gave a distinct observation that separated him from the previous writers. Hamilton outlines religious tolerance in Bengal by noting that while the region was officially denoted as Muslim, it did not seem so because there were so few Muslims living there in comparison to Hindus, and many Hindus held leadership roles in local government. He accounts for this softening of religious intolerance on the side of the Mughals by mentioning that Hindus far outnumbered Muslims in this region, which therefore made religious intolerance hard to carry out even if the Mughal government had wanted to be intolerant. He writes, "The Religion of Bengal by Law established, is Mahometan, yet for one Mahometan there are above an Hundred Pagans, and the publick Offices and Posts of Trust are filled promiscuously with Men of both Perswasions."<sup>91</sup> Hamilton's contemplation of the feasibility of forcing Islam on a majority Hindu region was thus the closest among these travelers' accounts to the

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<sup>90</sup> Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, ed. Sir Richard Carnac Temple (Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint Limited, 1967), 39.

<sup>91</sup> Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1727), 25.

conclusions drawn by recent scholars like Ikram, Eaton, and Rahman, who highlight the minimal Muslim presence in early modern Bengal and the corresponding need to accommodate Hindu people and practices in this peripheral province of the Mughal Empire. Works like Hamilton's also built upon the conceptions and "realities" that other European travelers had created, but the British introduced the idea of the infeasibility of enforcing a ban on *sati*. It is possible, too, that Hamilton was criticizing Mughal rule for its inability to assert control over Hindus.

Ultimately, we see a trend of increased attention toward religious tolerance over time. In addition, Europeans in particular made two key observations when it came to Mughals granting Hindus permission to practice their religion with the second overtaking the first over time. In the case of Bernier, the belief was that the Mughals allowed Hindus to practice their religion out of principle. In his view, the Mughals put value into the belief that anyone should be able to practice the religion of their choice. This view eventually got overshadowed by the works of Manucci, Tavernier, and Bowrey as they all asserted that the Mughals stood to gain financially if they created a system where Hindus paid or bribed the government in order to practice as they pleased. This shift gradually painted the Mughals in an increasingly negative light, from open-minded overseers to selfish exploiters.

### **Accounting for Consent**

As travelers gradually paid increasing attention to how the Mughals permitted Hindus to commit *sati*, they also became more suspicious that Hindu widows were not consenting to the practice. As discussed before, Sasani argued that voluntary *sati* was

allowed by the Mughals while forced immolation was illegal.<sup>92</sup> He does not clarify if this was legal under Hindu or Muslim law, but he makes the point that a woman's consent was key to undergoing the practice. In addition, he alludes to consent indirectly by citing instances in Hindu epics when wives of gods willfully sought to prove their fidelity through flame, which he thinks may have served as a textual basis for Hindus adopting widow immolation as a custom.<sup>93</sup> All told, Sasani's view adds up to the perspective that, if a woman was permitted to go through with *sati*, she must have consented to it. European travelers, on the other hand, increasingly questioned whether the widows agreed to the ritual or even were of sound and sober mind to make that decision.

At first, European travelers from Italy and France who visited the region in the mid to late seventeenth century began exploring an "infidelity rumor," which exposed how women chose *sati* but used the practice for their own gains as opposed to expressing religious devotion. Early travelers Manucci and Bernier share an anecdote in their narratives that discusses an instance where a jilted woman chose to immolate herself to exact revenge on a lover. In Manucci's time exploring the Bengal region, he encountered an instance of *sati* in Rajmahal. He recounts a woman willfully facing the pyre after murdering her husband in hopes of running away with a musician who had refused her. He writes, "Thus finding herself deprived of a husband, and her reputation gone, she

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<sup>92</sup> *The Dabistan*, 76.

<sup>93</sup> *The RĀMĀYAN of VĀLMĪKI*, trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith (London, 1870-1874), 497; *The Dabistan*, 189. French traveler Jean-Baptiste Tavernier mentioned some early events of the *Ramayana* concerning the kidnapping of Sita, but he did not include the section of the story that relates most to *sati*: Sita's entrance into the fire to prove her fidelity to her husband. Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, 191.

resolved to be burnt.”<sup>94</sup> The story goes into an unexpected turn when Manucci notes that she dragged her lover into the fire with her when she mounted the pyre.<sup>95</sup> While this event is striking in nature, it emphasizes a woman’s consent in the process of self-immolation. The woman, instead of perhaps running away, faced the pyre, and recognized that she could use this ritual to punish her lover. Bernier also recounts the aforementioned infidelity rumor but notes that he has heard this tale frequently circulating around India, and he hypothesizes that the story may have reached Europe.<sup>96</sup> This echoes Manucci’s previous sentiment that this woman underwent the sacrifice willingly even though she may have had ulterior motives for the ceremony. Ultimately, this infidelity rumor created a “reality” or schema that was even picked up by British travelers like Alexander Hamilton.<sup>97</sup> This anecdote also presents some tropes of a dangerous/sexually liberated woman that perhaps struck fear in Europeans as they saw Indian women who could dole out an excruciating, fiery death as well as endure one. It represents the kind of grudging appreciation for the fortitude of women who carried out *sati* that Rahul Saptala emphasizes in his work on the limited applicability of Said’s *Orientalism* thesis to seventeenth-century European representations of India.<sup>98</sup>

While Europeans such as Manucci and Bernier believed that a widow had chosen *sati* to exact her revenge, the British travelers in particular tended to cast more serious doubt on the consent of Hindu widows, and they accounted for this in different ways.

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<sup>94</sup> Manucci, *A Pepys of Mogul India*, 123.

<sup>95</sup> Manucci, *A Pepys of Mogul India*, 123

<sup>96</sup> Bernier, *Travels in The Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 14-15.

<sup>97</sup> Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 1, 278.

<sup>98</sup> Rahul Saptala, *The Limits of Orientalism: Seventeenth-Century Representations of India* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 11.



Thomas Bowrey touched on the concept of consent by noting that he doubts that widows, especially young women, could consent to the practice. He observed that the Hindu common people often arranged marriages among children as young as 8, although the children did not cohabit until they were about 12. This would account for the possibility that a young boy could pass away and lead to the *sati* of a young girl: “The Rich Merchants make Sure to marry their children before they come to 8 years of age. And the Poorer Sort faile not much in the Same. . . They are generally married at the age of 15 or 16 years, but the females doe rarely Exceed 8 years before they are married.”<sup>99</sup> While he worried for the young age of Hindu widows, Bowrey was particularly concerned about consent because he observed the brahmins gave a young widow “something to intoxicate” herself.<sup>100</sup> While Tavernier notes that some Europeans speculate that women are given something to dull their senses or anxieties, Bowrey is the first that I have read that directly observed a woman being given a substance that perhaps interfered with her consent to the ceremony.<sup>101</sup> Thus, the “reality” that was first introduced by Tavernier received a more negative implication from Bowrey. Bowrey’s assertion was that, instead of consenting to a practice beforehand and relying on substances to dull the nerves and fear, women taking substances were no longer able to consent to the ritual.

The British travelers also commented on the implementation of physical violence to coerce women to undergo the ritual. Bowrey observed an instance where a woman became reluctant to immolate herself, so brahmins “laid violent hands on her and threw

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<sup>99</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, 31.

<sup>100</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, 37.

<sup>101</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, 212.

her into the fire, which was not thoroughly inflamed, and there pressed the poore Creature downe with a long powle Untill she was consumed.”<sup>102</sup> While Hamilton did share the aforementioned “infidelity rumor,”<sup>103</sup> his opinion of consent is different than the earlier European travelers because he emphasizes the use of physical violence and substance use. He writes that brahmins “thrust her [the widow] in with long Poles. . . [or] Others again take somnifick Medicines, and stand by the Pile till they fall on it asleep.”<sup>104</sup> Thomas Salmon also cited an instance of violent coercion, stating that brahmins resorted to murdering the widow and casting her body into the fire after the widow refused to mount the pyre once the ceremony began.<sup>105</sup> It is the works authored by the British later in the period that emphasize the use of substances that dull one’s ability to consent, and ultimately the use of physical coercion and even murder to guarantee that the ceremony proceeded as the brahmins wished. Here, the proto-colonial outlook began to crystallize. While travelers like Tavernier observed an intoxicated woman mounting the pyre herself, the later writers emphasized women being thrust into the flames, with instances of brahmins murdering unwilling widows. Essentially in the cases of intoxication, violence, and murder, the ritual is not happening because the widow wishes it. Instead, this ritual is solely about the brahmins.

Through the years, travelers starkly changed their tune from making women’s consent central to highlighting blatant murder on the part of the brahmins. Travelers like Bernier and Manucci planted seeds of doubt as they elaborated on women who were

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<sup>102</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, 40.

<sup>103</sup> Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 2, 278.

<sup>104</sup> Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*. vol. 1, 278.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas Salmon, *Modern History: Or, The Present State of All Nations*, vol. 3 (Dublin, 1725), 357.

compelled to immolate, but at the same time they highlighted how women could use this ritual to their advantage to bring their accomplices down with them. However, in later British accounts, the writers suggested that Hindu religious leaders altogether ignored the woman's consent. As we will soon see, they also accordingly played up the trend of "rescue" in their accounts, with greater attention to religious conversion to Christianity as women were taken from their communities and often married off to Europeans.

### **Accounting for "Rescue"**

With this gradual heightening of concern over dubious understanding and sometimes disregard of consent, European travelers felt the need to intervene, as is evident in accounts of both Europeans attempting to dissuade widows to examples where people interrupt the ceremony to take the widow away. While not a "rescue" per se, Tavernier chronicles a case in Patna where a widow pleaded with a Dutch governor to be allowed to commit *sati*. Tavernier writes about how the Dutch governor who, "touched by the youth and beauty of the woman, sought to turn her from her resolution."<sup>106</sup> While it is unclear if the governor was successful in dissuading the widow, this shows that Europeans took an interest in stopping immolations if they believed they had the power to. Further, Bernier gives an example where he observed Portuguese settlers "saving" Hindu widows in areas of greater European influence such as sea ports.<sup>107</sup> While Tavernier established a possible schema that would have allowed for Europeans to have an authority on intervening on *sati*, he only describes the attempts of other people where

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<sup>106</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, 221.

<sup>107</sup> Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 18.

he was not involved. Bernier did eventually attempt to stop an immolation himself. He recalls that, following the death of a clerk he knew, the widow was set on sacrificing herself, but Bernier convinced the woman to live because she was a mother.<sup>108</sup> He proceeded to reassure the woman that he had made sure that the woman would receive a pension to ensure that she and her sons would have resources to survive.<sup>109</sup> This instance is distinct because Bernier reveals that perhaps a reason why the woman was choosing to die was because of financial reasons, but Bernier, as he was friends with the deceased clerk, was able to come to a long-term solution to secure a stable life for the widow and her children. While Bernier played a role in preventing a *sati* from happening, Manucci interfered with a ceremony as it was happening. The writer makes reference to an instance where an Armenian traveler interrupted a *sati* ceremony, and his Armenian colleague eventually married the widow and converted her to Christianity.<sup>110</sup> In these examples, Bernier and Manucci build upon Tavernier's schema, but they put themselves in these narratives and are able to discuss their own opinions and feelings in being personally involved in a dissuasion or "rescue." This testimony set the stage for future writers, especially British travelers, to recount more instances of *sati* "rescue" as Europeans intruded on immolations.

British writers like Bowrey and Hamilton both chronicled instances where British armed forces halted a *sati*, but both of these accounts elaborate further on the aftermath of the rescue with both sources discussing the later lives of the widows. Bowrey mentions

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<sup>108</sup> Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 9-10.

<sup>109</sup> Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 10.

<sup>110</sup> Manucci, *A Pepys of Mogul India*, 125; Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, vol. 1, 18.

an instance of *sati* “rescue” where British soldiers kidnapped a ten-year-old widow, removed her from the community, and converted her to Christianity.<sup>111</sup> This “rescue” differs from the others mentioned previously because, in Bowrey’s chronicle, the British were instigating the rescue, and he specifically noted that the woman now lived “with the English in our Factory of Metchlipatam.”<sup>112</sup> Bowrey’s testimony demonstrates a shift in the depictions of *sati* in the period because of his increased attention toward widows living alongside the British after their “rescues.”

While one might expect that from Bowrey forward, British forces would resoundingly reject Hinduism and seek to convert Hindus to their own religion, Hamilton cites an instance where the exact opposite happened. The author recounts an occasion of a British officer, Job Charnock, being notified by his troop that a young woman was about to face the pyre. In response, the officer sent some of his men to take the woman from the ceremony and bring her to him. The two lived together and eventually had children, but Hamilton makes a point the widow did not convert to Christianity; rather, “she made him a Proselyte to Paganism.”<sup>113</sup> Hamilton notes that when the woman died, Charnock paid to entomb her, and on the anniversary of her death each year, he killed a rooster at the tomb as a sacrifice to her.<sup>114</sup> In sum, Charnock rejected the *sati* element in “paganism,” but converted to her religion after saving her, according to Hamilton. We do not find this story in the earlier texts even though it would have been unfolding during the decade that Bowrey visited Bengal. Although these later British writers elaborate further

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<sup>111</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, 40.

<sup>112</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, 40.

<sup>113</sup> Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1727), 8.

<sup>114</sup> Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 2, 8.

on the lives of Hindu widows as the women increasingly became a part of British communities, we can see nonetheless that not all British “rescuers” were set on eliminating all aspects of “paganism” from these women. Hamilton’s account suggests that at least one British officer was perhaps converted to “paganism” by a Hindu widow—meaning that the officer felt like he could choose which practices were unacceptable (immolation) and which were acceptable (sacrificing animals). Here, the “reality” of rescue was expanded by the British as they both sought to include these widows in British spaces and began to discuss which parts of Hinduism they found acceptable.

Although earlier European travelers did write about instances of *sati* “rescue,” it was the later British writers who elaborated more on Hindu women becoming a part of British communities, and at times, converting to Christianity. With earlier European accounts, travelers were more likely to discuss instances when other people such as Armenians or Portuguese were instigating the “rescue” or a singular instance where Bernier dissuaded the widow of a friend, but the British were the ones to write about themselves personally or of British forces that were putting a stop to the practice themselves. Further, they began to tell the stories of women post-rescue, particularly on how they practice religion.

. . .

These patterns in British travel writing all preceded the eventual securing of Bengal after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the eventual banning of *sati* by the British

government in 1829 once the British were able to enforce such a rule.<sup>115</sup> The reign of Aurangzeb marks a time period where British and European travelers were observing the practices of Hindu people but lacked any real authority to intervene on a large scale. The observations they made came to inform the eventual ban on the practice. European writers, the British in particular, perceived this practice to be increasingly forced upon women without government intervention on the part of the Mughals, so they more and more found themselves wanting to “save” Hindu women by intervening and eventually banning the practice, demonstrating their own religious intolerance and misunderstanding why Mughals chose to allow Hindus to practice as they pleased. British writers cast Hindu women as “victims” with brahmins as “patriarchal oppressors,” which left the British feeling the need to assert themselves as “heroes” in the travelogues that they wrote. In this way they began to characterize Hindu women as helpless, and brahmins and Mughals as greedy and exploitative, which helped the British believe that they were culturally superior and had authority to “save” these “backward” people. They created their own colonial “reality,” which was absent from *The Dabistan* and questionable in the French and Italian accounts. Travel literature like the works discussed above revealed how the British were coming to understand others and their place within the world, and the trends of consent, toleration, and intervention demonstrate the self-righteous path the British were treading as they tightened their colonial grip on South Asia. This will come into play in the following chapter as I examine how the British saw themselves as self-

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<sup>115</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1995), 169.

righteous in the way that they despised widow immolation—particularly in how they saw *sati* as an invasion of domestic privacy. Hence, British travelers were subconsciously solidifying their idea of how a “correct” marriage/family/patriarchy was supposed to play out as they grappled with why they abhorred *sati*—namely because brahmins and Mughal governors seemed to dictate the religious practice of Hindu widows where the British saw husbands as the “true” religious authority.



**Chapter 2: “Horrid Destruction” or Spiritual Devotion?**  
**Sati as the British Guide to Marital Fidelity in Early Modern India**

Early modern travelers to the Indian subcontinent were awed by the antiquity of its indigenous inhabitants’ customs and culture. As historian Rahul Sapra observes, the apparent longevity and durability of Hindu Indian traditions, in particular, afforded them due respect from post-Renaissance Europeans, who admired classical Greece and Rome as the points of origin for much of what they regarded as pure and honorable in their own societies. Sapra maintains that seventeenth-century European writers regarded Hinduism as “civilized” and appreciated that its antiquity made it a religion with numerous complexities.<sup>116</sup> He also argues that before the 1800s, although travelers believed *sati* to be unusual, many Europeans lauded the practice as a “heroic sacrifice.”<sup>117</sup> For Sapra, the Orientalist binary of barbarism and civilization becomes muddled when addressing *sati* because, before the 1800s, European travelers did not want to prevent them from happening even if they did not personally agree with them.<sup>118</sup> In this chapter, I hesitate to concur with all of Sapra’s assertions, noting that European writers did often put the onus of marital fidelity, in this case performing immolation, on the woman. In travel narratives, Europeans often conflated marital fidelity with *sati*, giving perhaps too much attention to how women proved their fidelity as opposed to men based on the lengthy accounts of *sati* that seldom even mention any information about the deceased husband. In adopting this view, the British were overemphasizing women in a manner that

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<sup>116</sup> Rahul Sapra, *The Limits of Orientalism: Seventeenth-Century Representations of India* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>117</sup> Sapra, *The Limits of Orientalism*, 11.

<sup>118</sup> Sapra, *The Limits of Orientalism*, 91.

paralleled their own definitions of marital fidelity, as only a woman could immolate herself, and the deceased husband had no control over whether his wife would undergo the practice.

Through observing the Hindu practice of ritual widow suicide, European and British travelers were able to conceptualize Hindu gender dynamics through the lens of marriage, a social institution that both cultures shared. Historian Stewart Gordon employs sociologist Per Otnes's concept of a non-human cultural "mediator" while investigating Muslim Mughals and Hindu common people, and I use the term in a similar way: marriage being a cultural mediator that Europeans and Hindus shared and that travelers used to make cultural comparisons.<sup>119</sup> Through analyzing their accounts of *sati*, one can come to understand what European travelers were conceptualizing as marital duty in comparison to a separate account such as *The Dabistan*. Marital duty, particularly on the part of the wife, was paramount in both cultures' conceptions of marriage, but they meant different things in practice. With little context on the religious justification of the ritual, European travelers viewed *sati* as the epitome of a brahmin's patriarchal force over Hindu women.

In this way, the British clarified aspects of their own familial and marital values through their writing on immolation. I posit that Britain's emerging colonial ventures aided in the shift of marital and familial identity that was occurring in the time. Historian Lawrence Stone argues that one of the major shifts in British family life between the

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<sup>119</sup> Stewart Gordon, "Hindus, Muslims, and the Other in Eighteenth-Century India," in *Surprising Bedfellows: Hindus and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern India*, ed. Sushil Mittal (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 14.

years of 1500 and 1800 was a focus on “distance [from the wider community], deference, and patriarchy to what I have chosen to call affective individualism.”<sup>120</sup> I contend that this emphasis on increased familial privacy was buttressed through British travels to India as we will see that one of the major concerns that British writers voiced regarding widow immolation was that it was being instigated and at times enforced by brahmins—the public heads of Hinduism, as opposed to the heads of private households. With *sati*, British writers were observing brahmins invading the privacy of Hindu families with the enforcement of immolation when a husband could not consent to this practice because he was deceased. Through this, the British accentuated what it meant to them to be Protestant colonizers because of the value they put on privacy and the disgust they demonstrated for “priestly” brahmins’ oversight of widow immolation.

### **Marital Fidelity in the Christian Holy Household**

Before analyzing European travel works and how they invoked “correct” marriage norms in their evaluations of *sati*, we must come to understand what early modern Europeans, and Britons in particular, viewed as a “correct” marriage. As stated above, Lawrence Stone argues that throughout the entire early modern period, Britons gradually put an increased value upon the insulation of the private family from the greater community. He elaborates on this concept of “affective individualism” by highlighting four main elements, including “intensified affective bonding of the nuclear core at the expense of neighborhood and kin; a strong sense of individual autonomy and the right to personal freedom in the pursuit of happiness; a weakening of the association of sexual

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<sup>120</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England*, 22.

pleasure with sin and guilt; and a growing desire for physical privacy.”<sup>121</sup> Clearly, three of these four main elements of affective individualism were overseen within the household, one presumably headed by a breadwinning male father figure. Stone contends that the major shifts toward affective individualism in British family norms were caused by the introduction of capitalism, Protestantism that eventually became Puritanism, and Europeans’ increasing understanding of science and the world around them with the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment.<sup>122</sup> What forms no part of Stone’s explanation for the development of affective individualism in British familial ideals is the manner in which early modern Britons engaged with the world around them as empire-builders—colonizers in the making.

In an important passage, Stone outlines how the rise of Protestantism colored British marriage and understandings of how religion worked within and around the family. He writes, “The priesthood of all believers meant in practice that the husband and father became the spiritual as well as secular head of household. The aggrieved or oppressed wife could no longer rely on the priest to provide a counterpoise to potential domestic tyranny arising from this new authority thrust upon her husband.”<sup>123</sup> In essence, Stone posits that gradually, following the Protestant Reformation, the British began to accept the idea that within a marriage, a husband became the head of religious affairs within the household, and the wife lost all agency in making religious decisions for herself and her family. This meant that the British could not be in favor of a religious

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<sup>121</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England*, 22.

<sup>122</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 24.

<sup>123</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England*, 111.

officer of worship making decisions for a family because the agency was solely in the hands of the head of household. Perhaps the British believed that even following her husband's death, a Hindu wife was not to be coerced by a brahmin, such as in the cases of violence and coercion explored in the previous chapter. Instead, the Hindu wife should, in their eyes, have been subject primarily to the private patriarchy enforced by her husband.

Researchers of British familial history have echoed Stone's idea that the early modern period saw a solidification of domestic privacy in Protestant identity. Toni Bowers, in her work *The Politics of Motherhood* argues that in the early eighteenth century, women were struggling to redefine the concept of motherhood within the private household and assert themselves in the face of their domineering heads of household.<sup>124</sup> She gives the example of Samuel Richardson's sequel to *Pamela*, which Bowers characterizes as a conduct book in the form of a novel. One of the central tensions in *Pamela's* sequel is Mr. B's refusal to let Pamela breastfeed their children. Bowers asserts that upper-class women used conduct manuals as leverage for their desires to breastfeed their own children; these manuals served as tools for mothers to advocate for themselves to their heads of household.<sup>125</sup>

In the writings of European and British travelers of the period, one comes across an interesting pattern when analyzing how these authors explain the purposes of widow immolation as opposed to how a Persianate author approaches this topic. Through all of the European travelers I have read, I have found that each comes to explain the

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<sup>124</sup> Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>125</sup> Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood*, 153-154, 161.

justifications for the practice through the lens of the patriarchal grip men (particularly brahmins) had over women—particularly widows who had an especially diminished position in society. These travel narratives examining *sati* supported Britons’ perceptions of themselves as champions of Protestant domestic privacy, untouchable by ordained religious leaders who guided public worship.

### ***Sati* under European Scrutiny**

With the creation of European travel narratives came the creation of symbols, stories, and schemas that authors used to make sense of what was going on around them in a way that their audiences would understand. As discussed in the last chapter, French and Italian travelers paved the way and created a framework for British writers as they grappled with making sense of India, gender dynamics, and Hindu“ism.” However, European and British writers alike assimilated their investigations by comparing them to concepts with which they were already familiar—for instance, Christianity and marriage. Thus, their interpretations were colored by assumptions of perhaps what a marriage or religion “should” look like, and in turn, the British in particular crystalized their own notions of a “correct” marriage through their examination of Hindu practices like widow immolation.

Thomas Bowrey was one of the first British travelers to write about *sati*, but before describing the practice itself, he counterposed the lives of the single dancing women who lived along the Coromandel coast. He writes,

They are wholly at their own choice whether they will marry or noe. . .therefore I think Seldom or never they leave this life. . .to marry, whereby their pleasure is very Uncertaine, not onely through means of a jealous Husband, but for that Diabolicall Custome of this Sect in Generall, that by their long practised Evil

ways, cause the wives to be burnt to ashes in the fire at the Death of the Husbands.<sup>126</sup>

This excerpt reveals that Bowrey believed that the unmarried dancing women would not have wanted to marry because it would ultimately lead to an unhappy life with a husband and presumably end in *sati*. In this way, Bowrey equated Hindu marriage entirely to how he thought it typically ended: in a woman ending her life prematurely after the death of her husband.

Bowrey then proceeds to describe an instance of *sati* where he has major doubts about whether this ceremony holds meaning for the widows because it does not seem that they consent to the ritual and often they leave young children orphaned in the process.<sup>127</sup> He also contends that the Mughal government does not exert much effort to prohibit the practice because Hindus pay an annual tax in order to preserve it.<sup>128</sup> He sees the preservation of *sati* as a matter of greed on the part of the Mughal government and the brahmins themselves—not an act with serious spiritual implications. Bowrey agreed on this point with Tavernier, who observed that brahmins in Surat were entitled to collect the jewelry of the deceased in the ashes.<sup>129</sup> Bowrey clearly pitied Hindu wives for their lack of agency and saw *sati* as an ultimately pointless process with little benefit for the women who partook in it; he portrayed brahmins and Mughals as the true beneficiaries of the practice.

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<sup>126</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal*, 14

<sup>127</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal*, 40.

<sup>128</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal*, 39.

<sup>129</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, 213.

Travelers also hypothesized that this practice was used by husbands to prevent their wives from poisoning them. Alexander Hamilton observed that in the Bengali village of Canara, brahmins employed widow immolation to deter women from poisoning their husbands after marital disagreements, which he thought was surprisingly common at the time he was traveling.<sup>130</sup> Hamilton shared this anxiety with Tavernier, who recalled that in Surat Hindu men cooked their own food due to their suspicion surrounding the food that their spouses prepared.<sup>131</sup> The fear alluded to in these accounts was perhaps rooted in the travelers' assumption that food preparation was a woman's responsibility, which made food poisoning one of the few bargaining chips that women could employ to assert their authority within a marriage. Frightened about the potential of women asserting themselves too heavily over their spouses, it seems like *sati*, in the eyes of European travelers, became more about behavior control than the expression of religious piety.

Food poisoning could also be linked to controlling a woman's sexuality, as Manucci, Bernier, and Hamilton all traced the tale of a woman who poisoned her husband because she fell in love with a young musician in hopes that they would elope. However, the musician rejected the widow, and she was resigned to throw herself on her husband's pyre. The tale indicates, however, that the woman saw her lover at the ceremony, and at the last instant, she hurled the lover into the fire with her and they both burned on the

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<sup>130</sup> Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1727), 277.

<sup>131</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, 76.



pyre of the poisoned husband.<sup>132</sup> This story implies that Hindu married women could not trust their lovers because these men could always abandon them. In addition, if it circulated widely enough that European travelers in disparate parts of India heard versions of it, it could scare Hindu men from pursuing an extramarital relationship. If a woman was willing to kill her husband to pursue an illicit relationship, it would be reasonable to expect that she might grow violent if her lover scorned her. It is important to note, however, that the man in this situation was not punished by society as the woman was. Rather, the man was punished by the vengeance of a woman who had already proven her capability to take a man's life.

However, one of the more common reasons for ritual suicide that several travelers pointed out was the tremendous stigma that was put upon women who survived their husbands and avoided the ritual altogether. Alexander Hamilton recalled that in the Bengali village of Canara widows who avoided sacrifice were considered cowards. Thus, they shaved their heads and were forced to work as slaves under the family of their deceased spouse.<sup>133</sup> Tavernier added that widowed women were also forced to remove all jewelry and were moved to such detestable sorrow that they would have been happier to end their lives than continue their lives marginalized from their communities.<sup>134</sup> However, it appears that some writers may have contested the staying power of the stigma faced by widows. Thomas Salmon, writing in 1725, asserted,

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<sup>132</sup> Nicholas Manucci, *A Pepys of Mogul India, 1653-1708*. trans. William Irvine (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1913), 123; Bernier, *Travels in The Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 14-15; Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, 278.

<sup>133</sup> Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 1, 277.

<sup>134</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, 209.

As to the infamy of remaining a widow, I believe that is pretty much worn off, and if they are not suffered to marry in their own tribes, 'tis said they will turn Mahometans or Christians for a second husband; and sometimes they will list themselves among the dancing girls that they may enjoy a full liberty.<sup>135</sup>

Clearly, Salmon may have exaggerated in thinking that widow stigma was nearly gone, as he did mention that women who avoided *sati* left their communities following the deaths of their husbands. Europeans felt that sorrow was inescapable for these women because they had to choose between an excruciatingly painful death or a dismal life stripped from the community they had known their whole lives. Unable to remarry in many cases, these women could not regain what they had lost in their present life, which, as we will see, allowed Hindus to ponder what was possible for these widows in the afterlife.

European writers, as they attempted to make sense of ritual suicide, also reflected upon the spiritual benefits to the women who partook in them. Bernier revealed that Hindus believed in the “transmigration of souls”—meaning the ability for a person’s consciousness to persist past a bodily death and continue life in another vessel on earth. He explained this by recalling a *sati* where a woman exclaimed “five, two” to the crowd before leaping into the fire. He discovered that these numbers corresponded to what she believed her progress was on her journey to spiritual “perfection.” He writes, “This being the fifth time she had burned herself with the same husband, there were wanted only two more similar sacrifices to render her perfect.”<sup>136</sup> This means that Hindus in Surat understood that a woman must suffer many sacrifices in different lives in order to earn a

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<sup>135</sup> Salmon, *Modern History, Or, The Present State of All Nations*, vol. 3, 357.

<sup>136</sup> Bernier, *Travels in The Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 13.

favorable afterlife, which Bernier does not elaborate on. Tavernier notes a similar incentive where Brahmins urged wives to sacrifice themselves by promising that if they did they would see their husbands again “in some other part of the world with more glory and more comfort than they have previously enjoyed.”<sup>137</sup> Tavernier was perhaps touching on an idea that the widow was facilitating the reincarnation of the couple as opposed to just herself. John Fryer, recording happenings around Surat in the 1630s, also acknowledged a spiritual reward for these widows. He stated that the community remembered these women fondly and “canonized” them as they moved to the next life.<sup>138</sup> What these promises of spiritual reward as described by Europeans all had in common was that they were perceived as individual spiritual benefits for the woman involved with no leverage on the afterlives of their spouses.

Although multiple European writers acknowledged the spiritual benefits of widow immolation, these assertions were often drowned out by the arguments that Hindus were enforcing an incorrect patriarchy that valued brahmins and Mughal governors over the wishes of Hindu husbands and wives. Largely, Europeans concluded that *sati* was a product of Mughal and brahmin greed. Bernier asserted that women who enacted *sati* lacked rationality due to an “excess of affection,” resulting from both grief and the understanding that they would live the remainder of their lives in shame.<sup>139</sup> Additionally, the practice was used to control a wife’s behavior as evidenced through anecdotes warning against the consequences of poisoning a spouse’s food or deciding to elope with

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<sup>137</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, 209.

<sup>138</sup> John Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia*, vol. 2 (Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint Limited, 1967), 102.

<sup>139</sup> Bernier, *Travels in The Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 14.

a lover. In sum, the European understandings of *sati* fueled the later British insistence that Hindus were enforcing a “wrong” patriarchy that did not give enough power to heads of household who they believed should have charge of marital and familial spirituality.

### **Counterpoints from a Sympathetic South Asian**

Much like the Western travelers, Mirza Zu’lfiqar Sasani sought to understand Hindu gender dynamics in the Bengal region. In contrast to European travelers whose purpose for writing was recounting their experiences to a largely European audience, Sasani’s mission in his work *The Dabistan; or School of Manners* was to understand the practices of various religions practiced in South Asia, including religions also practiced in Europe like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Through investigating *The Dabistan*, historians can better adjudicate common misunderstandings on widow immolation because Sasani gave greater attention to understanding Hindu belief and practice through investigating scripture and not asserting his own value judgements and preconceived notions on those who practiced religion differently than he did. His consistent methodical focus on religious practice in conjunction with consecrated texts led him to draw his analysis from Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Sasani’s interpretation of *sati* alongside the Hindu epics contrasts significantly with the interpretations made by European travelers.

One of Sasani’s first references to Hindu marriage in the *Dabistan* points to an example of widow remarriage—a concept that European writers widely neglected. Sasani explains that in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* “for when Para-su-Rama had exterminated

the Chattris, their wives held intercourse with the Brahmans and bare them children."<sup>140</sup> He even chronicles an instance where, with the consent of the husband, a woman may have sex with another man.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, Sasani writes, "On the decease of a brother, another brother by a different father but the same mother, may marry the widow of the deceased."<sup>142</sup> He also offers a potential explanation for this loosening of marriage rules by noting that men typically outnumbered women in the communities he observed.<sup>143</sup> This relaxed view on marital norms shows that perhaps the European perception of stigmas placed upon Hindu widows who remarried or long outlived their husbands was an overblown one—or one based on observation of a few localized events as opposed to closer investigation of Hindu marital life as a whole. Sasani is much more specific as I think he attempted to understand Hindu marriage on the terms of Hindu people as opposed to attempting to make sense of a few scattered events without much attempting to understand Hindu life holistically.

Sasani also reflected on the concept of women choosing to fulfill their "marital duty" through committing *sati*. He proposed that the ultimate duty of a wife to her husband was to sacrifice herself because "the Almighty pardons all the sins committed by the wife and the husband, and that they remain a long time in paradise."<sup>144</sup> This is powerful because it is the wife's responsibility to save her husband and ensure a favorable afterlife for both, and a man would never know if his wife had "saved" him

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<sup>140</sup> *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, vol. 2, 66.

<sup>141</sup> *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, vol. 2, 67.

<sup>142</sup> *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, vol. 2, 69.

<sup>143</sup> *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, vol. 2, 70.

<sup>144</sup> *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, vol. 2, 75.

because he would already be dead when she would sacrifice herself. Sasani explains that women represent a man's "passions" or "desire," and through a woman thrusting herself into a fire, the couple's passions burn along with her and are purged and purified.<sup>145</sup> The *Dabistan* thus outlines a very different justification for widow self-immolation because, instead of conceptualizing it as a tool of the patriarchy to control the behavior of women, it actually puts women at the center of the struggle for "salvation" and makes *sati* a religiously essential practice.

The text also notes that *sati* held a unique promise to women who undertook it. Sasani reveals that a woman who sacrificed herself would be rewarded with being born as a man in her next life. However, if a widow refused, she was doomed to reincarnate as a woman forever.<sup>146</sup> This runs counter to Tavernier's observation that the widow would return once again to her husband in death. This also reveals that a person's soul was essentially genderless because a being could reincarnate as a woman or man in subsequent lives based on their behavior in their present one. This assertion boils down to a main disagreement between this Persian author and Tavernier, a Christian European. Sasani has a much better grasp on the concept of reincarnation meaning that one's soul can transfer into many different bodies as opposed to Tavernier asserting that one's soul is bound to their spouse's, even after death.

Sasani was more objective in his approach to understanding Hindu practices and gave a potentially more feminist reading of *sati*, where women were active and

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<sup>145</sup> *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, vol. 2, 77.

<sup>146</sup> *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, vol. 2, 76.

consenting in the formation of their own destiny. The aforementioned European accounts placed blame on brahmins for preying on bereaved widows, and they emphasized that women either became too intoxicated or overcome with emotion to truly be able to make a decision with such grave consequences.<sup>147</sup> *The Dabistan*'s explanation distinguishes itself by envisioning how widow immolation would be spiritually necessary for Hindu couples with benefits for both husband and wife. It makes sense why European writers were so perplexed as to why women would plead with governors to die in this way, but when the fate of both a woman and her life partner is on the line, the pleading seems much more reasonable.

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British travelers sought to disseminate their works because the world was becoming increasingly interconnected, and this resulted in Europeans increasingly becoming familiar with religions that they had not yet observed at home. This process offered up a moment of opportunity where these travelers were coming to understand different faiths around them and what role Europeans Christians might have, if any, in intervening. Yet these travel narratives spread misinformation concerning Hindu marriage practice because these writers were exclusively writing from a European Christian point of view and assuming that their own interpretations of religion and gender dynamics were correct.

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<sup>147</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round The Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, 38; Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, 212; Bernier, *Travels in The Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 14.

After analyzing a Persianate account next to European travelogues, one must ponder why Europeans, particularly the British, had such a negative view to a practice that they, perhaps not to their knowledge, misunderstood. This misunderstanding of the duty of Hindu widows perhaps can be traced back to early modern Britons' focus on "individualism" within the family unit, among other values that distinguished themselves from both the Mughal Muslims and the people who they came to call "Hindu."

This also extends chronologically farther back an argument set out by Felicity Nussbaum in her book *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives*. Her main argument is that it was in the eighteenth century that the British were coming up with multiple interpretations of how different "non-Western" practices were evil and unjust, which set up British colonizers to be the "heroes" who saved the vulnerable, in this case Hindu widows.<sup>148</sup> Essentially, with these travel narratives, Europeans were attempting to undermine Hindu practices in order to assert their own cultural, moral, and religious superiority, which also builds upon the aforementioned thesis of Kathleen Wilson's *New Imperial History*.<sup>149</sup> While Europeans were subconsciously attempting to understand these foreign "others" they were concurrently defining themselves by highlighting their ways of differing from people of India.

The European understanding of the reasons for *sati* very well may have to do with the different philosophies through which early modern European and Mughal

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<sup>148</sup> Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones*.

<sup>149</sup> Wilson, "Introduction: Histories, Empires, Modernities," 2



communities conceptualized marriage and the family. As we have discussed Lawrence Stone emphasizes the rise of familial privacy in this time period, and he also emphasizes the rise of Protestantism and Puritanism in the time period, which put the responsibility on the individuals to show outward piety to prove that they are elect members of the community.<sup>150</sup> Perhaps Protestantism was not the only factor spearheading a new sense of individualism in the European family. Rather, Europeans could have been sharpening their own values through their disgust of *sati* where brahmins and Mughal governors were making a decision that, in their eyes, “should” have been solely the husband’s to make. During this period, Europeans were also emerging from the Thirty Years War that separated the continent into two dueling factions of Protestant or Catholic that “defined political, economic, cultural, and intellectual life. . . [where] both Catholic and Protestant represented all that the other hated, feared, and suspected.”<sup>151</sup> The combination of individualism and strict binaries between Catholic and Protestant compelled European writers to assume the same binaries existed in the places that they traveled.

Buttressed by the works of other European authors, the British reached the middle of the eighteenth century poised to pose as “saviors” with real motive to intervene in the Hindu people’s way of life. Tavernier, following the death of a personal friend, begged his widow not to burn herself. Upon her relenting and contending that she would find another way to die if not allowed to burn, Tavernier exclaimed, “‘Let it be so then,’ I rejoined, with undissembled anger, ‘but first take your children, wretched and unnatural

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<sup>150</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 24.

<sup>151</sup> *Surprising Bedfellows*, 14-15.

mother! Cut their throats, and consume them on the same pile; otherwise you will leave them to die of famine.”<sup>152</sup> While sources are split on whether pregnant women or mothers of small children were compelled to commit *sati* or not, even early in the period, Europeans saw themselves as having a responsibility to intervene in a practice that they still did not completely understand.<sup>153</sup>

In practice, the British of the later eighteenth century and early nineteenth century had to counterbalance their motive to intervene in the Hindu people’s way of life with their desire to present themselves as the Hindus’ deliverers from Mughal “oppressors.”<sup>154</sup> As of 1800, they remained nervous that intervening to curb *sati* could cost them their Indian empire by alienating too many of their Hindu subjects. Nevertheless, the implication of this chapter’s findings is that, when they did announce a regulation outlawing *sati* in the parts of India under their control in 1829, their discussion surrounding the banning of *sati* was not “saving brown women from brown men” like Gayatri Spivak has posited. In reality, British colonists were barring Hindu families from reaching their spiritual potential and hindering them in the cycle of Hindu reincarnation. In this way, the subaltern were not allowed to speak in defense of their own traditional practices because European colonizers misinterpreted its meaning and spoke for them by

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<sup>152</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*. vol. 2, 11.

<sup>153</sup> The *Dabistan* states that pregnant women are exempt from immolating themselves (*The Dabistan*, vol. 2, 76); Salmon notes that *sati* was rare because mothers did not immolate themselves if they had children. (Salmon, *Modern History*, vol. 3, 357); Similarly, Tavernier explains that there is not widow stigma and compulsion to commit *sati* if a woman is a mother (Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, 210); John Henry Grose reports that Hindu widows will immolate themselves after they have raised their children to adulthood (Grose, *A Voyage to the East Indies*, vol. 1, 194).

<sup>154</sup> Again, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 241.

banning the practice. Instead of “white men saving brown women from brown men,” they saw themselves asserting a “correct” European marriage and properly privatized patriarchy upon them.<sup>155</sup> During this period, the British were crystalizing their idea of a “correct” marriage/patriarchy—one that valued domestic privacy and the supremacy of the head of household in religious affairs. As the British struggled to form this identity at home, travelers were solidifying this concept through observing religious practices far afield.

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<sup>155</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 297.

### **Chapter 3: Staging *Sati*: British Theatrical Interpretations of Widow Self-Immolation**

It is the night of the 27th of October 1823 at the Drury Lane Theatre in London, and excitement is buzzing throughout the room as patrons find their seats at W.T. Moncrieff's new play *The Cataract of the Ganges; Or The Rajah's Daughter* at its premier. A promise of an entertaining night of theatre is buttressed by advertisements revealing that there will be a real waterfall cascading behind the actors.<sup>156</sup> While many of the play-goers may not have seen far beyond their home country, in a few short moments, as the crowd hushes in anticipation, they will be transported nearly 5,000 miles away to imagine what it might be like to witness the dramas troubling those living in the Ganges River basin. By experiencing this night of entertainment, patrons may also start to form their own ideas of this new exciting place and how it fits in with their idea of the world.

While travel narratives were popular literature and consumed for entertainment throughout early modern Europe, theatre was a unique mode for disseminating information, particularly for those who were either illiterate or could not perhaps afford travel books. Theatre scholar David Hammerbeck asserts that at least in the case of the French "popular theatre served as a counterpoint to novels, travel accounts, ethnographies, and philosophy, one that can be viewed more accurately as the voice of *le peuple*."<sup>157</sup> Dramatists used distant South Asian settings and themes to explore schemas of Hinduism, gender, and colonialism, and perhaps reflect on the little knowledge they

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<sup>156</sup> "Moncrieff, William Thomas (1794-1857)." in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 38. ed. Leslie Stephen. (New York, NY, 1894), 172.

<sup>157</sup> David Hammerbeck, "India on My Mind: French Theatre, Enlightenment Orientalism and The Burning Widow." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (2014), 60.

gleaned from travel writing. The fact is that few playwrights had visited the place that they drew from for theatrical information. In their work, they were indeed disseminating what Lata Mani describes as colonial discourse to shape the mind of the British public on what India was and how Britons saw themselves fitting in their narrative.

In her seminal work *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on 'Sati' in Colonial India*, Mani describes colonial discourse as “an interpretive apparatus for apprehending India that acquired specific kinds of force with the shift of the East India Company in the latter half of the eighteenth century from a mercantilist to a territorial power.”<sup>158</sup> Mani notes that “‘discourse’ signals a double focus: forms of knowledge and modes of description. Colonial discourses refer to the schemas that developed alongside, mediated, and helped secure European conquest and domination.”<sup>159</sup> It would be easy to categorize travel writing as colonial discourse. However, dramatists also gleaned from these works and other popular knowledge of colonial regions and communicated it through theatre to a larger audience throughout Europe, so drama should not be neglected when discussing colonial discourse.

It is important to note, however, that these plays may not have been strict recreations even of the details they gleaned from travel narratives. Ros Ballaster notes in reference to John Dryden’s (1631-1700) famous play *Aureng-Zebe* (1676) that the author “plays fast and loose with the known historical facts.”<sup>160</sup> Historian Andrea Major argues

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<sup>158</sup> Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on 'Sati' in Colonial India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>159</sup> Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, 3.

<sup>160</sup> Ballaster, Ros. *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of The East in England, 1662-1785* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 279.

that sensational travel narratives were themselves a blend of fact and fiction. She explains that, due to the expected wide readership of travel narratives and the many writers competing for a profit, “certain levels of plagiarism, exaggeration, and embellishment were expected. . . [T]here was still a general consensus that travel accounts, though undoubtedly useful and entertaining, were not always as reliable as one might wish.”<sup>161</sup> Thus, although these sources were not reliably factual, playwrights would gather information from these works for inspiration, and perhaps unintentionally so, helped shape a “colonial reality” of India and Hindu“ism” for theater-goers.

While researchers in many fields have explored *sati* within a legal, literary, and historical lens, few have strictly investigated the practice as it appeared on the stages and the scripts of Europe. Surprisingly, more work has examined French plays that represent *sati* than British plays that do so. Literary scholar Dorothy M. Figueria asserts that early French works on travel to India such as Pierre Sonnerat’s *Voyage aux Indes orientales* (1782) helped shape the European public’s idea of *sati*, which in turn influenced a number of librettists to draw upon *sati* for inspiration. The topic also inspired a number of works of fiction by authors like Voltaire, along with permeating the plots in a number of operas around Europe.<sup>162</sup> Figueria’s main argument regarding *sati* and theatre is that European librettists were drawn to *sati* as a subject because it reflected common operatic

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<sup>161</sup> Andrea Major, *Pious Flames: European Encounters with Sati, 1500-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72.

<sup>162</sup> Dorothy M. Figueria, “Die Flambierte Frau: Sati in European Culture,” in *Sati: The Blessing and The Curse: The Burning of Wives in India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 58, 60.

themes like a tragic death attributed to a strength in devotion and it reflected the symbol of the “noble savage” in a woman who immolated herself.<sup>163</sup>

French language scholar Binita Mehta also tackles *sati* drama as she argues that plays that explored *sati* in eighteenth-century France used the topic to reflect on Catholicism and religious corruption.<sup>164</sup> This concept is lightly introduced in Figueria’s chapter as she discusses Hindu “corruption: mirroring French religious corruption.”<sup>165</sup> Mehta discusses multiple French plays about religion including Voltaire’s *Mahomet* (1742) and Lemierre’s *La Veuve du Malabar* and concludes that many French playwrights in the eighteenth century wrote works that staunchly opposed the “fanaticism and superstition” found in religion both in India and in France.<sup>166</sup> Mehta also discusses another play that I will be analyzing: John Dryden’s English-language drama *Aureng-Zebe*. Mehta asserts, along with Peter Craft in a separate article, that Dryden based much of his play on information from the travel narratives of Francois Bernier.<sup>167</sup> However, Dryden diverted from the source material, as he incorrectly associated self-immolation with Islam and the Mughals. Mehta explains that Dryden most likely chose this because of its dramatic value to cast Aurangzeb as a villain instead of giving a factual account of Mughal history.<sup>168</sup> Regarding *sati* in *La Veuve du Malabar*, the author notes that the work “portrayed *sati* as the product of an uncivilized culture, which required the enlightening

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<sup>163</sup> Figueria, “Die Flambierte Frau,” 67, 63.

<sup>164</sup> Binita Mehta, “‘Barbaric’ India: The Widow, Sati, and French Imperialism,” in *Widows, Pariahs and Bayadères: India as Spectacle* (Lewisberg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2002), 56.

<sup>165</sup> Figueria, “Die Flambierte Frau,” 66.

<sup>166</sup> Mehta, “‘Barbaric’ India,” 56.

<sup>167</sup> Peter Craft, “Dryden’s Transformation of Bernier’s ‘Travels.’” *Restoration in English Literary Culture, 1660-1770* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2009), 48.

<sup>168</sup> Mehta, “‘Barbaric’ India,” 72.

influence of the French. The need to ‘rescue’ the widow from the cruel custom of sati in Lemierre’s play indicates a certain ‘desire’ for India that continued to entice the French even after they had lost all tangible contact with it.”<sup>169</sup> This excerpt shows that the portrayal of *sati* in Lemierre’s play is only one example of the greater trend in French theatre about Asia in general and how it reflected French attitudes disapproving of what they found to be religious corruption at home and abroad.

English-language and theatre scholar Daniel O’Quinn gives a broader-brush analysis on the role of “imperial” plays in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British theatre and colonialism in his chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*. O’Quinn is able to zoom out and examine general trends based on the narrower case studies of previous researchers. O’Quinn’s analysis relates to *sati* in that, in the 1790s, plays surrounding the military in colonial areas became popular, and the author elaborates on this point, contending that “imperial theatre focused attention on the regulation of despotism and constructed representations of masculinity appropriate to the military and bureaucratic rule of Britain’s colonial holdings. Spectacle was being mobilized in remarkably sophisticated ways, not only to reap profits at the box-office, but also to secure volatile notions of imperial supremacy and national election.”<sup>170</sup> This excerpt influences my analysis because critics and playwrights alike elaborate about the use of “spectacle” to grab at the attentions and purse strings of early modern British audiences. *Sati* can be seen as an imperial “spectacle” as it was used as a plot device in

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<sup>169</sup> Mehta, “‘Barbaric’ India,” 84.

<sup>170</sup> Daniel O’Quinn, “Theatre and Empire” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, ed. Jane Moody and Daniel O’Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 234.



the climax of each of the plays I investigate. Each play reflects, in either dialogue or in stage direction, that the immolation stood at the climax of each work, and in all plays aside from one, the woman was to be rescued. In the following sections, I build upon O'Quinn by revealing how these plays grapple with the topic in the intellectual context of multiple trends found in the travel accounts of the previous century and a half.

One of the more contemporary investigations of colonial drama is theatre scholar David Hammerbeck's study of French theatre in relation to imperialism. Hammerbeck sets his lens to include LeMierre's *La Veuve du Malabar* along with two other plays concerning widow sacrifice by nineteenth-century French playwrights Jospel Aude and Eugene Scribe. Hammerbeck argues that these works in conjunction undermine the concept of "Orientalism as a singular agenda, one whose complicity with colonialism and imperialism, according to Said and other critics, only solidified during the time period. . . (1770-1822)."<sup>171</sup> Hammerbeck sees Aude and Scribe's works "creat[ing] a performance space somewhere between the 'here' of France, and the 'there' of Malabar. . . providing a hybrid cultural space which questions notions of French superiority abroad."<sup>172</sup> The work uses these French plays as a case study against Said's hypothesis and reveals that these works largely avoid the "us" versus "them" dichotomy in favor of a greater sense of cultural (and perhaps religious) plurality.

Clearly, with regard to French theatre, David Hammerbeck and Binita Mehta have diverging views on whether eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century *sati* theatre in

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<sup>171</sup> Hammerbeck, "India on My Mind," 46.

<sup>172</sup> Hammerbeck, "India on My Mind," 46.

France followed a singular philosophy concerning the condemnation of the practice. On the one hand, Mehta posits that French works of the period largely attacked *sati* and perhaps used the practice of “corrupt” Hinduism to allude to the failings of the Catholic Church.<sup>173</sup> On the other hand, Hammerbeck maintains that French plays were not uniform in their condemnation of *sati* with some plays leaving moral judgment ambiguous.<sup>174</sup> I grapple with this debate as I apply it to my study of British theatre; I conclude that British theatrical works, particularly the later works approaching the early 1800s, coherently reject *sati* as a practice but do not necessarily reject Hinduism as a whole. Rather, they separate immolation from Hinduism and seek to “rescue” and protect those widows who lie vulnerable to the corrupt brahmins who had distorted religion to hurt others.

In this chapter, John Dryden’s play *Aureng-Zebe* stands as a foil to the two later plays—Mariana Starke’s *The Widow of Malabar* (1791) and W.T. Moncrieff’s *The Cataract of the Ganges* (1823)—in the ways that the works understand how *sati* fits within Europeans’ concepts of Hindu“ism.” In Dryden’s work, the Muslim noblewoman Melesinda commits *sati* following the death of her husband Morat. However, Melesinda is not coerced by a religious leader, and it appears that the practice is more of an Indian cultural practice than a practice ascribed to any particular religion, Hindu or Muslim.

However, as dramatists over time gained access to more travel accounts and official East India Company correspondence in published form, playwrights and their colonial discourses shifted in their presentations of the practice. The later works of Starke

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<sup>173</sup> Mehta, “Barbaric’ India,” 56.

<sup>174</sup> Hammerbeck, “India on My Mind,” 46.

and Moncrieff assert a distinct and newer attitude toward *sati* and how the practice fit into Britons' conception of Hindu“ism.” In both plays, *sati* is seen as a corrupt departure from “true Hinduism,” which had supposedly been hijacked by greedy, unscrupulous brahmins. These works portray a dichotomy of sorts between the old traditionalist Hindu brahmins who cling to the practice of *sati* and the younger generations of Hindus who oppose the practice and wish to purge their religion of rituals unauthorized by ancient scriptures. Both works also feature young female Hindus with peers who disavow the seemingly overly ritualistic practices of the distorted “Hinduism” around them. In both cases, the younger generation of Hindus join forces with British military powers to “rescue” the widow and escape the clutches of “wicked” brahmins, which demonstrates a shift in attitude in response to a greater amount of travel narrative source material to draw from along with the strengthening of colonial power and corresponding growth of British investigation on Hindu“ism.” What makes the plays following Dryden most unique is their source base. Following the publication of Dryden’s work, many travelers, including an influx of British writers, had published a number of prominent travel works that addressed *sati* and Hindu practices. The change in perspective can also be ascribed to the increase in colonial discourse generated by way of missionary accounts, translations of Hindu texts, and “scholarly” investigations on Indian religions by the British in India during the time period as the British sought to regulate native Indians according to Indian “laws and customs.”<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> See Bernard Cohn, “The Command of Language and The Language of Command,” in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 25-26. See also, for example, Warren Hastings, “Plan for the Administration of Justice,” 1772, quoted in Robert

### Scripting *Sati* for the English Stage, 1675-1823

Historian Peter Craft has elaborated that the play *Aureng-Zebe* was written with the specific agenda to boost the public's image of the Mughal ruler because Aurangzeb was a trading partner of Charles II.<sup>176</sup> Set in Agra in 1660, the play follows the Mughal succession crisis: the sons of aging emperor Shah Jahan grapple to inherit authority over the empire. The two main competitors are ambitious older brother Morat and steadfast younger son Aurangzeb, who is characterized as reliable to the old emperor. There is a captive queen named Indamora who has a love affair with Morat who is already married to Melesinda. Aurangzeb, however, loves Indamora as well. The play reaches a climax when an uprising, led by Morat, is set upon the "citadel." However, Morat is ultimately unsuccessful and dies in the arms of his lover Indamora. What makes this death all the more tragic is that Melesinda, the Muslim widow of the unfaithful Morat, resolves to immolate herself, which she does off stage. The play ends as Aurangzeb inherits the throne and Shah Jahan gives Indamora to Aurangzeb to be his bride.<sup>177</sup>

Following the work of Dryden, other British playwrights grew interested in putting *sati* on stage. The first of these playwrights was Mariana Starke (1762?-17668), who wrote *The Widow of Malabar* in 1791. Historian Jeffrey Richard notes that this work is loosely based on the play *Le Veuve du Malabar* by French playwright Antoine-Marie Lemierre. Richardson traces the life of this play by noting that the first English translation of Lemierre's work originated, not in England, but the United States with a

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Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 118.

<sup>176</sup> Craft, "Dryden's Transformation of Bernier's 'Travels,'" 47.

<sup>177</sup> John Dryden, *Aureng-Zebe, A Tragedy* (London, 1732).

translation by dramatist David Humphrey.<sup>178</sup> Humphrey was most likely inspired by the work, first encountering it in France around the 1770s.<sup>179</sup> The playwright then decided to create an “imitation” of his own in 1788 and brought the play to the Old American Company in Philadelphia, where it garnered notable popularity in the early 1790s.<sup>180</sup> However, Mariana Starke, the woman who brought the production to British audiences in 1791, emphasized in an advertisement that her play was not simply a duplication of Lemierre’s or Humphrey’s plot. She asserted that this was because she did not think that the script, as it was presented by Lemierre, would appeal to British audiences.<sup>181</sup> This was most likely because in Lemierre’s script, the dominant colonial force and “heroes” of the play were French imperial forces.

Starke’s interpretation of *The Widow of Malabar* most notably differed from those of Lemierre and Humphrey as the colonizers in the story changed from French to British. The plot surrounds a young widow, Indamora, who is being forced into committing *sati* following the death of her husband Bukah. Indamora reveals to the young brahmin that she feels that she deserves this “punishment” because she fell in love with a British officer, and after being barred from marrying a Christian, she was forced to wed the aged and unpleasant Bukah. Through finding solace through conversing with the young brahmin, she figures out that he is her brother. The young brahmin was estranged from her sister shortly after birth as he was abandoned by a river after refusing to breastfeed.

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<sup>178</sup> Jeffrey H. Richards, “Sati in Philadelphia: The Widow(s) of Malabar.” *American Literature* 80, no. 4 (December 2008), 648.

<sup>179</sup> Richards, “Sati in Philadelphia,” 649.

<sup>180</sup> Richards, “Sati in Philadelphia,” 649.

<sup>181</sup> Mariana Starke, *The Widow of Malabar, A Tragedy* (London, 1791), 9.

This young brahmin is especially troubled because he has been ordered by the chief brahmin to escort her to the funeral pyre, but the two resolve to prevent this. Meanwhile, the story shifts to an army camp for the British military stationed in Malabar. Little to Indamora's knowledge, her former lover, a British officer named Raymond, has returned to Malabar in search of her. After learning that Hindu forces have called a truce, Raymond is bewildered to learn that it is because the Hindus have decided to pause battle to perform a *sati*. However, Raymond soon realizes that the *sati* is his lover Indamora, and he resolves to save her. The young brahmin then comes to the scene to reveal that the Hindu "truce" was a trick, and Hindu soldiers have set fire to British ships. Raymond joins forces with the young brahmin to save Indamora as Raymond then goes to bargain with the Rajahs at the Hindu temple to save Indamora while the chief brahmin begins the immolation ceremony.<sup>182</sup>

At the immolation ceremony, the characters learn from the young brahmin that Raymond has been killed by Hindus. The young brahmin then takes it upon himself to prevent the ceremony by debating the chief brahmin presiding over the ceremony about the true merit of the practice. Raymond then appears alive at the funeral pyre with perhaps another Heavenly sign in a flash of lightning. The officer brings his troops with him to intimidate the chief brahmin, and so fearful of military combat, the chief brahmin commits suicide by stabbing himself with a dagger. Rejoicing in the reunion with his estranged lover, Raymond delivers a speech ending with the hope to "in yon [Hindu]

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<sup>182</sup> Starke, *The Widow of Malabar*.

Temple. . .on its altars, fix the Christian Cross.”<sup>183</sup> It is striking as the play concludes with this heavy-handed assertion that the British will enforce Christianity on the Hindu people with an abrupt end to indigenous practices. The play ends with a “rescued” *sati* and a declaration that by the death of the chief Brahmin that “there fled a soul which, had Religion’s sun Unclouded beam’d upon it, might have grac’d and comforted the land.”<sup>184</sup> Raymond asserts that the wicked brahmin practiced a distorted Hinduism, but, “My Indamora, This genial sun shall shed his rays on thee,” and in the case of the young brahmin, Raymond states, “Whilst thou, young Priest, who ‘spite Errors mists, Discovered and pursued bright Virtue’s paths.”<sup>185</sup> The play concludes with a strict dismissal of the corrupt Hinduism in the past in favor of pursuing a new relationship with the younger Hindus who disavow brahminical ritualism.

W.T. Moncrieff’s *The Cataract of the Ganges: Or, The Rajah’s Daughter* voiced a similar objection to brahminical traditions. The play was extremely popular, as evidenced by the recording of thirty performances in 1823 at Drury Lane Theater in the *Edinburgh Dramatic Review*.<sup>186</sup> The play’s esteem is also acknowledged by *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review*, which noted, “*The Cataract of the Ganges* is a most effective spectacle, and draws over-flowing house every evening.”<sup>187</sup> The plot revolves around a Brahmin named Mokka who is put in charge of the province of “Guzerat” while the Rajah, Jam Saheb, looks for aid while at war. The war is fought between the

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<sup>183</sup> Starke, *The Widow of Malabar*, 47.

<sup>184</sup> Starke, *The Widow of Malabar*, 47.

<sup>185</sup> Starke, *The Widow of Malabar*, 47.

<sup>186</sup> *Edinburgh Dramatic Review*, vol. 5-6 (Edinburgh, 1823).

<sup>187</sup> “The Drama and Public Amusements.” *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review*. no. 233 (November 1823), 717.

“Hindus” and the Muslims—led by an emperor named Ackbar. In an effort to end the fighting, Mokarra resolves to arrange marriage between Jam Saheb’s son Zamine and Ackbar’s daughter Princess Dessa. Zamine refuses, and when led to the altar, it is revealed that Zamine is actually a woman. Jam Saheb reveals that to save Zamine from a gender-based infanticide, Saheb raised Zamine as a boy. This revelation that Jam Saheb violated Hindu tradition delegitimizes him from the throne, and Mokarra decides to force Zamine to marry him so that Mokarra can permanently acquire the throne. Zamine refuses, but is threatened by Mokarra who says, “Dare to reject me further, I will transform thee to the holy wilderness of Himmalaya, there to be burnt upon the sacred pile.”<sup>188</sup> Meanwhile, British officer Mordaunt and his assistant Jack Robinson are accompanied by Hindu siblings Iran and Ubra to rescue Zamine from this precarious situation. As Zamine mounts the pyre, at the very last moment British forces along with Iran burst onto the scene, causing so much commotion that the prince is able to escape.

### **John Dryden’s *Aureng-Zebe* and Seventeenth-Century Travelers’ Tales of *Sati***

Dryden’s play *Aureng-Zebe* has garnered attention from historians for many reasons. Namely, Peter Craft notes that Charles II read the play, and the work was written to introduce Britons to one of Britain’s newest trading partners.<sup>189</sup> In addition, the Victorian edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* remembered *Aureng-Zebe* as Dryden’s “finest rhymed tragedy.”<sup>190</sup> The work is also unique in two distinct ways. The first distinction is that Melesinda, the *sati*, is a Muslim. As Dryden should have learned

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<sup>188</sup> W.T. Moncrieff, *The Cataract of the Ganges; Or, The Rajah’s Daughter* (London, n.d. [1823]), 34

<sup>189</sup> Craft, “Dryden’s Transformation of Bernier’s *Travels*,” 47.

<sup>190</sup> “Dryden, John (1631-1700).” in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 16. ed. Leslie Stephen (New York, NY, 1888), 67.



through examining the existing travel narratives, *sati* was a Hindu practice, not a Muslim practice. The second distinction is that Melesinda is not rescued at the end of the play; she immolates herself on the pyre of her husband. In the other cases I investigate in this chapter, the ritual is interrupted, and the woman in peril is “saved” from the flames. This is perhaps because *Aureng-Zebe* is characterized as a tragedy and Melesinda’s sacrifice only further villainizes Morat. Melesinda is sacrificing herself to a husband who was unfaithful to her, highlighting the devotion and innocence of Melesinda in relation to her spouse. This is demonstrated when Indamora questions Melesinda for committing *sati* for an unkind husband. Melesinda responds, “Had he been kind, I could no Love have shown: Each vulgar Virtue would as much have done. My Love was such, it needed no return.”<sup>191</sup> This shows that Melesinda is fulfilling her marital promise. This is essential to key into as Melesinda is immolating herself to keep a marital oath with her husband as opposed to an oath to her religion.

Dryden is also most explicit in his discussion of Melesinda being joyous about her immolation. This is emphasized in Melesinda’s final moments when she announces, “What Grief do I betray? This is the Triumph of my Nuptial Day, My better Nuptials; which, in spight of Fate, For ever join me to my dear *Morat*. Now I am plead’d; my Jealousies are o’er: He’s mine; and I can lose him now no more.”<sup>192</sup> She clearly expresses that she will join her husband in the afterlife, in a place that Indamora does not inhabit. More interestingly, the above quote alludes to the fact that committing *sati* is like a

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<sup>191</sup> Dryden, *Aureng-Zebe*, 93.

<sup>192</sup> Dryden, *Aureng-Zebe*, 93.

second and more important step in marriage. While there are allusions to the afterlife, Melesinda is committing this act to stay faithful to her husband.

What is revealing about Dryden's work is that the Muslim characters are uneasy about Melesinda undergoing the ritual. This would not make sense if Dryden thought that *sati* was connected to the belief system of Islam. For instance, following Melesinda's proud announcement of sacrificing herself, Shah Jahan states, "Let no false show of Fame your Reason blind."<sup>193</sup> This insult shows that while there may be religious significance to the ritual, even the Muslims, who in this case would be approving of the practice, think that Melesinda is acting out more in emotion rather than reason. And indeed Melesinda does not connect the practice of *sati* to a religious obligation. She references neither Islam nor Hinduism when discussing the practice. In fact, her Muslim counterparts urge her not to undergo the ritual. Rather, Melesinda focuses on the marital obligation she has to her husband. She is essentially proving her fidelity to Morat—not to a religious cause. This demonstrates that Dryden did not connect the concepts of *sati* and religion together the way the travel narratives of Bernier and Tavernier had done. Right before Melesinda mounts the pyre, Aurangzeb describes the scene as "the Procession of a Funeral Vow, Which cruel Laws to Indian Wives allow."<sup>194</sup> In this quote, Dryden is possibly linking the practice to marital duty for Indians and the laws that all Indians, Hindu and Muslim alike, would have to follow.

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<sup>193</sup> Dryden, *Aureng-Zebe*, 93.

<sup>194</sup> Dryden, *Aureng-Zebe*, 93.

In presenting *sati* in this way, Dryden departed from the French sources whose content his play was partially intended to popularize. As we have seen, Bernier emphasized that the Muslim Mughals allowed for practices like immolation because they sought not to “disturb the pagans in the free exercise of their religion.”<sup>195</sup> Bernier is more clear in labeling women who commit *sati* as Hindoo later in his text.<sup>196</sup> Tavernier described the widow stigma that led to widow self-immolation as “an ancient custom among the idolaters of India.”<sup>197</sup> These details show that Dryden’s work diverts from the information found in Tavernier’s and Bernier’s travel narratives in how he discusses *sati*. While Peter Craft may be right in noting that Dryden used Bernier’s work as an inspiration, the play is not a recreation of Bernier’s writing, as evidenced through how Dryden wrote about *sati*.

Indeed, there are several additional ways in which Dryden’s work deviated from Bernier and Tavernier’s accounts. For instance, Bernier’s work addressed a dissuaded *sati* and an instance of *sati* rescue. He even mentioned an instance where he urged a woman not to immolate herself when his husband's pyre was set to be lit, eventually convincing the woman not to undergo the ritual.<sup>198</sup> He also cites an instance where Portuguese in the area had interrupted the ceremony, barring the woman from sacrificing herself.<sup>199</sup> Dryden’s play does portray Melesinda’s companions attempting to dissuade her, but no one is there to rescue her when she mounts the pyre. Craft also discusses how

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<sup>195</sup> Francois Bernier, *Travels in The Mogul Empire*, vol. 2. trans. Irving Brock (London, 1826), 4.

<sup>196</sup> Bernier, *Travels in The Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 14.

<sup>197</sup> Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2. trans. Valentine Ball (London, 1889), 209.

<sup>198</sup> Bernier, *Travels in The Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 9-11.

<sup>199</sup> Bernier, *Travels in The Mogul Empire*, vol. 2, 18.

Dryden drew upon Bernier to create the character of courtier Fazel Chan. Bernier mentioned a figure named Fazelkan as an advisor to emperor Aurangzeb, and Dryden named a minor court character after him.<sup>200</sup> While Craft argues that there are several references in Dryden's work that match up with excerpts from Bernier, *Aureng-Zebe* is not meant to be an accurate picture of what French travelers observed in the Mughal court. This is evidenced most clearly in the play's portrayal of *sati* and how it differed from how Bernier and Tavernier wrote about the practice.

Although Dryden's play was published around 150 years before the last of the works studied in this chapter, it should be noted that his play had staying power in persisting on the stage and in the minds of the British public. For example, the *Larpent Play Collection*, which chronicles playscripts performed in Britain between 1737-1824 includes a 1774 adaptation of Dryden's work by William Addington entitled *The Prince of Agra*.<sup>201</sup> In addition, an article in the 1809 *The Edinburgh Review* critiqued an edited anthology of Dryden's works, commenting on *Aureng-Zebe* specifically to note how readers in the early nineteenth century thought that plays such as this used exotic settings as a crutch for a mediocre plot.<sup>202</sup> While the review may not have been positive, it indicates that Dryden's *Aureng-Zebe* was still well-known enough by reviewers and audiences to function as a touchstone for the type of exotic sensationalism that, a few years later, would be repeated in Moncrieff's *Cataract of the Ganges*.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Craft, "Dryden's Transformation of Bernier's *Travels*," 48.

<sup>201</sup> "Collection Guide: John Larpent Plays," *Online Archive of California*, Online Archive of California, 2022. <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf1h4n985c/>.

<sup>202</sup> "Scott's *Edition of Dryden*," *The Edinburgh Review or Critical Journal*. No 25 (October 1809), 123.

<sup>203</sup> Reviews on *Aureng-Zebe* or anthologies that feature the play include: "Dryden." *Dramatic Miscellanies* 3 (London, 1785): 160-186; "The Works of John Dryden." *The Annual Review, and History of Literature, for*

### **Proliferation of British Travelers and Appraisals of Indian Religion**

Following the publication of Dryden's play in 1676, one can account for the change in attitudes for the later playwrights by examining the new sources of information that potentially influenced their works. Besides travel narratives already discussed, historians gravitate toward three main avenues of colonial intel on Indian religion that expanded Britons' impression of Hindu "ism" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: English translations of Hindu religious texts, missionaries' treatises on religion, and philological works that appeared in journals such as the *Asiatick Researches*. These works grappled with what Britons thought to be "true" Hinduism as opposed to "superstitious" and corrupt abuses of power by religious leaders.

Historian Bernard Cohn elaborates on the translation of Sanskrit works to English, but he focuses on law codes. In his famous essay "The Command of Language and The Language of Command," Cohn argues that the British were deeply interested in learning Sanskrit because it would give the key to understanding Hindu religion and law. This was of particular interest to Governor General Warren Hastings as he sought to stabilize his rule over the region of Bengal in the early 1770s. Hastings asserted that "Indians should be governed by Indian principles, particularly in relation to law." This meant that the British needed to translate Sanskrit texts in order to ascertain law so that they could better implement it as colonial administrators. Essentially, the British wanted to take legal authority away from the brahmins of the region who were seen as the enforcers of Hindu

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1805 4 (London, 1809): 765-768; "The Dramatic Works of John Dryden." *The Retrospective Review* 1 (London, 1820): 113-161; "The Poetical Works of John Dryden." *The Edinburgh Review* 47 (Edinburgh, 1828): 1-36.

law. This was in part because the British feared the brahmins were too powerful in their communities with a blind following of believers who took their devotion to a brahmin's authority too far.<sup>204</sup>

While the British were interested in Hindu law codes, they also strove to understand the basic tenets of the religion itself—an effort that was buttressed through the work of missionaries attempting to better understand their audiences. Brian Pennington investigates the reflections of British missionaries and how they began to conceptualize Hindu“ism” as different from the other religions they observed in India. For instance, Pennington considers Baptist missionary William Ward to be an early ethnographer as he published a multi-volume epic on Hindu religious life and practice titled *Account of the Writings, Religion, and Manners of the Hindoos* (1807-1811). Ward organized his analysis by including sections on behavior, history, literature, and religious practice, and he concluded that Hinduism was a distorted monotheism that had been overtaken by brahmins who used the religion to fulfill their own selfish needs. What is perhaps most notable about Ward is that he pored over translations of Hindu religious texts such as the Vedas, which were becoming increasingly accessible as the British were translating these works from Sanskrit into English in order to clarify for themselves the textual basis of Hindu practices.<sup>205</sup> Ethnographies, like those of Ward, provided a more nuanced basis for the British to begin to differentiate Hinduism from other religions in India and, in turn,

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<sup>204</sup> Cohn, “The Command of Language and The Language of Command,” 25-26, at 26.

<sup>205</sup> Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77-81.

guided British opinion on whether certain Hindu practices were “valid” (tied to religious texts) or abuses of priestly (brahminical) power.

Pennington shares the common scholarly view that the translations of Hindu texts and increased interest of British imperialists in Hindu religion eventually came to a head in the creation of the *Asiatick Researches* by Orientalist William Jones starting in 1789.<sup>206</sup> After moving to India in 1783, Jones, along with a cohort of like-minded colleagues, developed a deep interest in studying the cultures, landscapes, behaviors, and religions of Asia, so he spearheaded the Asiatic Society of Bengal and created its periodical, which was published with annual editions spanning to 1839.<sup>207</sup> One of the journal’s main focuses was on differentiating the different religions Britons encountered in India, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. The writers of *Asiatick Researches* distinguished Hinduism apart from other religions by asserting that it was “irrational” in comparison to Islam, Sikhism, and Buddhism, which appeared more “rational, systematic, textual, and moral in nature.”<sup>208</sup> This resulted in Jones and other writers claiming that Hinduism was a relatively amorphous set of beliefs and practices manifested within a more coherent region and culture. Pennington writes, “The Orientalist held India to be essentially and fundamentally Hindu, but ‘Hindu’ here signaled, rather than the religion of rational subjects, the process of overproduction and excess that both terrified and seduced the architects of British India.”<sup>209</sup> Altogether, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the vast proliferation of colonial

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<sup>206</sup> Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*, 80; 103-104.

<sup>207</sup> Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*, 104-105.

<sup>208</sup> Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*, 111-112.

<sup>209</sup> Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*, 118-119, at 119.

knowledge on Hinduism. This was caused by an expanding accessibility to Hindu religious texts in English. Thus, missionaries and cultural enthusiasts alike grappled with the concept of Hinduism as a religion in a way that made sense to Protestant Britons.

In this investigation of an “authentic” Hinduism, the British solidified their identity as tolerant protectors of “true Hinduism” through their disdain for *sati* as a ritual whose textual basis was questionable. British researchers searched for a scriptural justification for the practice as they believed that if the practice was not based in text then it was a corruption of “true” Hinduism. This search for “true” Hinduism also demonstrates that the British were not inherently intolerant of religions like Hinduism, but rather they were hoping to separate the religious texts from interpretations or “corruptions” made by brahmins—a set of people whose power they hoped to undermine (but from within the Hindu community, if possible).

### **Theatrical Portrayals of *Sati* in the Later Eighteenth and the Early Nineteenth Centuries**

Not coincidentally, the works of Moncrieff and Starke differ from Dryden significantly but in two main ways. First, they firmly ascribe widow immolation to Hinduism—which they understand to be a sort of monotheist practice enforced by Hindu brahmins. At the same time, they associate the practice with corrupt brahmins who attempted to impose the ritual on a younger generation who, perhaps influenced by the British Orientalist commentary, see the practice as an abuse of priestly power. Both of these interpretations can be linked to the proliferation of a text-based understanding of



Hinduism and Indian religion that gained traction in the first fifty years of British direct rule in India.

Both plays written in this time period center on the dramatists' issue of the practice of *sati* existing within Hindu practice with a marked link to a deity called Brama. Mariana Starke, through the words of the chief brahmin, elaborates on immolation stating, "the Priests of Brama, Lur'd by those gems which each deluded Victim Presents at his curst shrine, from age to age Enforce, th'ou this barb'rous land, a practice Which Frenzy, not religion, first began."<sup>210</sup> This quote is rich with a markedly different concept of both *sati* and Hinduism than that proposed in Dryden's play. In this work, it appears that the brahmins are led by a central deity, "Brama," and that brahmins themselves have become corrupt over time and created a practice where they can gain material wealth from widows. Here, Starke separates religion from "Frenzy," alluding in this way to an "authentic" Hinduism that the brahmins have corrupted for their own ends. Moncrieff also details brahmins declaring that a singular deity "Brama" receives widows in their sacrifices.<sup>211</sup> These depictions thus echoed the patterns outlined by Pennington wherein many researchers of Hinduism conceptualized the religion as a sort of monotheism with a cacophony of competing avatars that muddled the overall message of the belief system.<sup>212</sup>

What was more pressing was the debate on whether *sati* was a part of "authentic" Hinduism. The works later in this time period also demonstrate a shift in thought about how immolation fit within Hinduism. As discussed above, Starke emphasized that the

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<sup>210</sup> Starke, *The Widow of Malabar*, 19.

<sup>211</sup> Moncrieff, *The Cataract of The Ganges*, 31.

<sup>212</sup> Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*, 80; 112; 118

practice of *sati* was a creation of brahminic corruption, not of religious principle.<sup>213</sup> Moncrieff was even more explicit in distinguishing the beliefs and dispositions of brahmins from a “true” Hinduism. This is shown in a discussion of the practice of female infanticide. Hindu woman Ubra urges her lover Jack Robinson, “Blame not Hindoo mothers too harshly[,] Robinson. Nature pleads warmly in her bosom for the preservation of her daughters as you can; but duty—her religion.”<sup>214</sup> Further, in an introductory monologue, Mokarra, the villainous brahmin characterizes himself: “The prayer, the scourge, the fast, suit not Mokarra’s soul; humanity, love, and friendship, they’ve shut forth from my heart—what shall supply their place? Ambition!”<sup>215</sup> Clearly, Moncrieff’s characterization of Mokarra established a picture of innocent Hindus taken in by greedy brahmins from early on in the play. The theme is further expounded as Mokarra explains why the Hindus obey his commands. He says, “The Jahrejahs by hope and fear are bound already to me—I have entwined them with religious ties—they dread, yet cling to me. Oh superstition! thou mightest lever of the human mind.”<sup>216</sup> This excerpt most directly reveals that the Hindus are not inherently evil; rather Moncrieff posits that unschooled, superstitious Hindus are being manipulated by those in positions of religious power.<sup>217</sup>

### **Conclusion: *Sati* Theatre and British Colonial Identity**

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<sup>213</sup> Starke, *The Widow of Malabar*, 19.

<sup>214</sup> Moncrieff, *The Cataract of The Ganges*, 11.

<sup>215</sup> Moncrieff, *The Cataract of The Ganges*, 15.

<sup>216</sup> Moncrieff, *The Cataract of The Ganges*, 15.

<sup>217</sup> The theme of “superstition”—meaning the way that ordained religious leaders use fear to manipulate and gain power from their followers—is further explored in J.G.A Pocock, “David Hume: the *Essays* as contemporary history” in *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 177-199; Justin Biel also examines the role of superstition in his article “Edge of Enlightenment: the Akbar Tradition and ‘Universal Toleration’ in British Bengal,” *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 6 (November 2019): 1956-2006.

We can see that dramatists, following the patterns set out by travelers and philologists, began to shift their conceptions of *sati* going into the early nineteenth century. Tracing back to Dryden, we can see that travelers of the later seventeenth century had a much less text-based grasp of Hindu practice and how it differed from the religions of others in Asia. However, over the following century and a half, playwrights' perceptions of *sati* shifted in ways that echoed the information available to them as a result of strengthening of colonial power, growth in missionary efforts, and "scholarly" works that attempted to understand India, Hinduism, and Britain's role in the region.

Theatre, more so than travel accounts and erudite works like the *Asiatick Researches*, played a wider role in what historian Kathleen Wilson calls identity building. In her work *A New Imperial History*, she reveals that historians have been imagining colonial history anew as they reflect on how British identity changed in reaction to Britain's becoming an emerging colonial power.<sup>218</sup> Theatre shaped Britons' colonial identity because this art form was open to a general and illiterate public—many of these individuals would never see India, but through these plays, they formed an India of how Britons viewed the country and how they should judge the religion and religious practices of people they would never meet. These theatrical works shifted with the times, and, in turn, audiences received different, more nuanced, messages about "Hinduism" and how it was the onus of the British to "rescue" vulnerable Hindu women who fell victim to religious leaders.

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<sup>218</sup> Kathleen Wilson, "Introduction: Histories, Empires, Modernities." in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

The theatrical medium lent nicely to this practice; each play examined in this chapter came to a dramatic climax with people facing the pyre, and in most cases, at the last moment, being rescued. This narrative, buttressed by the visual images presented on the stage, helped form schemas of *sati*, India, and the “East” into the minds of these plays’ audiences. This can be evidenced by the critical reception of these works. *The Literary Magazine’s* review of *The Widow of Malabar* is particularly revealing because it used the phrase “preserved with great truth” and “affords a very striking picture of Oriental manners.”<sup>219</sup> We may never know if the reviewer had the authority or experience to declare Starke’s play an accurate depiction of life in India, but the reviewer certainly thought that it did. Theatrical work is important in this study of colonial knowledge because, starting with the travel narratives and flowing into the works of drama, British audiences were increasingly exposed to the images of widow self-immolation, which led them to feel satisfied that their own “real” religion had supposedly purged itself of the excesses of non-scripturalism and priestly power.

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<sup>219</sup> “Theatrical Intelligence,” *The Literary Magazine and British Review* 6 (January 1791), 68.

**Conclusion: Reflection Point: Grappling with British Colonial and Protestant Identity**

This past year of research has had me reexamine British imperialism in India and how the British came to view themselves in the process. I quote from my thesis proposal: “My hypothesis is that the proselytizing nature of Christians led to intolerance and the British feeling the need to save Indian women from the ‘oppressive’ expectations of their husbands. In this way, the British took license to be the white male saviors to ‘helpless, feminized’ South Asians.”<sup>220</sup> While this inference was informed by a semester’s worth of preliminary reading, my subsequent research has caused me to complicate this assertion—particularly the concept of the “proselytizing nature of Christians” as it played out with the British.

In this thesis, I have observed that the desire to save Hindu women was more pronounced among the British, as David Hammerbeck also pointed out while discussing *sati* theatre in France in the early nineteenth century. He posits that around the same time the British were starting to distance themselves from widow immolation, French playwrights were examining the practice as unusual but not necessarily something they had stakes in preventing.<sup>221</sup> Of course, earlier French writers Francois Bernier and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier had expressed some hopes of “rescuing” women from *sati*. Throughout this work, I have compared British perspectives alongside French and Italian writers, but what I have found is that over this long stretch of time the British transitioned

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<sup>220</sup> Abigail Fer, “Thesis Prospectus: Fidelity Afire: A Comparative Analysis of British and Mughal Conceptions of Marriage and Empire” (unpublished manuscript, 11 August 2021), typescript.

<sup>221</sup> Hammerbeck, “India on My Mind,” 46.

from removed observers to colonizers who saw themselves as having a responsibility to intervene. This originated in the later British travel narratives, and these ideologies spread to the greater British public through the creation of theatrical works aimed for large audiences.

I have also reconsidered the concept of “proselytizing nature of Christians” as the British observations of *sati* were informed by many different facets of British life. In the second chapter, I expounded on Protestant familial dynamics in early modern England as the British made private domesticity a foundation of their familial identity. This means that the head of household was the chief authority of religious practice in the home—superseding any authority that once belonged to religious leaders. In this way, many British observers did not necessarily despise widow immolation because it was a Hindu practice. Rather, British travelers interpreted *sati* as an invasion of privacy—primarily offending a Hindu husband who had no way of consenting to the practice.

Similarly, few British writers wished to abolish Hinduism in favor of Christianity as this would be intolerant. Travelers grappled with their identity as they were struggling to make sense of themselves as Protestant and “tolerant” in the face of a practice that made them severely uncomfortable, so British writers ultimately came to understand *sati* as an “inauthentic” Hindu practice so that they could “save” Hindu widows while also presenting themselves as tolerant of Hindu practices. This finding complicates my hypothesis because previously I had asserted that the British were consistently intolerant of Hindu practice, but in fact the British saw themselves as exceedingly tolerant and claimed to aid Hindus in practicing their religion more “authentically.”

The British also believed that the Hindus were led astray from the “authenticity” of their religion because of the corruption of two parties: brahmins and the Mughal government. They primarily saw brahmins and Mughal governors coercing Hindu women to sacrifice themselves for financial gain in the form of licenses and the material wealth left behind by the widow. However, what offended the British most of all was that Hindu husbands were left out of the decision-making process of the fates of their wives. By nature of the *sati* ritual, a husband would be dead and unable to consent to the wife undergoing it, so British writers saw that a Hindu widow should not be manipulated by a brahmin or Mughal governor—corrupt or not.

Thus, this research has led me to complicate my understanding of British imperial identity as I reflect on the nuance of identity-shaping in the years that Britain transitioned from politically weak travelers and traders to colonizers. There was not a coherent “supremacy” narrative when it came to the British in India. Instead, what unfolded was a messy process as travelers and playwrights alike were attempting to make sense of India and how the British fit in in relation to the country and its people. As travelers, Europeans were dependent on Mughal and indigenous Indians to survive, and researchers have proven that travelers did not uniformly reject Hinduism as backward or archaic. These interpretations would come later as colonists attempted to justify their rule over the region, and these ideas manifested themselves in theatrical works to convince Britons at home that colonial ventures were worthwhile. Ultimately, this research shows the merit in examining the nuance in how travel narratives impacted drama and the ways playwrights

interpreted (and at times distorted) colonial information to communicate their own opinions of the British empire.



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