

Women on Fire: Immolation, Consent, and the Revolutionary Subject

Sisters-in-Arms

*O*n September 23, 1932, Pritilata Waddedar, a twenty-year-old schoolteacher and member of the Indian Republican Army (IRA),¹ became the first woman to die in the commission of an anticolonial attack when she committed suicide after leading a raid on the Pahartali Railway Institute in Chittagong. Police found Waddedar's body outside the club, dressed in men's clothes and with no visible injuries, and discovered, tucked into her shirt, several pamphlets of her own writing, including "Long Live Revolution" and "An Appeal to Women." In the latter, she had written, "Women to day have taken the firm resolution that they will not remain in the background. For the freedom of their motherland they are willing to stand side by side with their brothers in every action however hard or fearful it may be. To offer proof I have taken upon myself the leadership of this expedition to be launched today" (122).²

Her body, spectacularly still outside the site of her attack, offers proof of another order. Of what it offers proof, the modes of reading and memorialization it invites, and the afterlives of that body and its articulations constitute the terms of a colonial and postcolonial struggle over

meaning making. At the time, Waddedar's dead body took on a kind of evidentiary status in the prosecution of her comrades, a colonial assertion of authority in the courtroom—a prophecy, perhaps, of the ways in which it would come again to be, decades later, the disputed object of historical narrative. Pritilata Waddedar, variously called terrorist, martyr, goddess, and dupe, thus, herself comes to be a kind of contested territory.

For colonial authorities, the discovery of her body outside the institute ended a months-long manhunt and verified the suspicion of her involvement in terrorist activities following the February death of a colonial police officer. Moreover, her body added to the growing cache of evidence against suspected IRA leader Surya Sen; at his trial, Waddedar, dead over a year, would be resurrected as witness against and indictment of her revolutionary comrades. But for those very compatriots in the IRA and for nationalist historians after them, the image of her corpse outside the institute preserved her as martyr. In the months following her death, a photograph of her face and the text of “Long Live Revolution” were printed on red leaflets, distributed throughout Chittagong as revolutionary memento mori. She joined the leagues of Bengali female revolutionaries like Shanti Ghosh, Suniti Chowdhury, and Bina Das and was glorified above them: she gave her life in her act of anticolonial violence, where they lived beyond theirs. As the exceptional sacrifice, her death rendered her exemplary.⁵

Hallowed as the first (and only) woman in official historical accounts to die during the commission of anticolonial terrorism in Bengal, her name became a synecdoche of blazing female heroism: *Agnikanya Pritilata (Firebrand Daughter, Pritilata)*.⁴ For nationalists and historians alike, Waddedar's memory has been distilled to the iconicity of a single name: “Pritilata,” as she is called in films, recollections, and—consistently—academic texts.

The assumption of a first-name identification represents a claim of intimacy that sits uneasily with my own explicitly feminist approach here, which aims to trace the unstable legibility of a form of political protest that depends on the destruction of life. This is not to suggest that to call Pritilata Waddedar by her last name as a scholarly practice is a recuperative or neutral gesture, but to insist instead upon careful attention to the gendered engine of memorialization that produced her as familiar and accessible to our touch across time—that by which Surya Sen also comes to have a single-name afterlife as “Masterda.” Compounding the authoritative proper noun *Master*, which denotes both his career as schoolteacher and his eminence, the honorific suffix *da* (“older brother”) familializes but does not familiarize

Sen: a professionalized memorial. The references to Waddedar by her first name, however, serve as a discursive fixing, rendering her at once exemplary and familiar, heroic and ancillary, relic and ruin. This cohering function is made possible by her gender and the mode of her death, a form of representational violence that avails her to scrutiny and to narrativization.

This essay will follow Pritilata Waddedar's body and memory as they are incarnated into legal, historical, and cultural evidence—made to speak, silenced, destroyed, and reimagined—by colonial authorities and nationalists alike. I will argue that, in the particular forms and terms of her sacrifice, Waddedar both augurs and undermines these future rewritings, offering her dead body as “proof” to systems of evaluation that it calculatedly confounds. For my purposes, Pritilata Waddedar is both a historical figure and a theorist of her own historicity. She argues, in her writing and with her body itself, for a form of self-memorialization that preserves rather than dissects the illegible and the unrepresentable. In those textual and bodily articulations, she resists and undermines the very processes by which she has come to be known under the sign of a single name.

Waddedar calls herself by another name entirely: a counterfactual, nondescriptive assertion of herself as *sati*, an immolated widow. At the heart of this articulation, I argue, is her own insistence that her political protest is self-immolation. In her diary, Waddedar describes Surya Sen's final words to her, “Women, regarded as a race of mothers in the Bengali households, also are enraged now in the display of valour but this chapter of history is yet to be recorded. Let the chapter be composed through your success or through your self-immolation” (“Assault” 264). Though she cites Sen here for her iteration of “self-immolation” as history making and community-building, she does not orient that act instructively; hers is to be a spectacular offering of her body to their shared cause, a signal flare of community. She writes that, for Sen, whether or not she survived is ancillary to the pedagogical and illustrative potential of her spectacular violence and obedience. Her self-sacrifice is intended to compose a history that the valor of her fellow women cannot. It writes history, a history recorded on her very body. But this corporeal history can only come to be in the absence of Waddedar as living, speaking actor. Waddedar's evocation of self-immolation here thus stands as a historically self-conscious semiotic practice that draws on and resignifies the contested colonial discourse of *sati*. It insists that individual self-destruction forms the body politic.

The language of self-immolation, and its attendant specter of *sati*, remarkably appears throughout the writings of women who participated in

anticolonial violence of the period. The invocation of *sati*, a practice largely disavowed and vilified in Bengal by the twentieth century, is a startling departure from the heroic lingua franca of revolutionary communities. Despite the heterogeneous composition of groups like the IRA, the women who participated in anticolonial violence, in particular, were marked by similarities in background and education. Many, like Waddedar, were well educated, came from progressive middle-class families, and held radical-leftist political views. Within this political community, *sati* was far from a naturalized contemporary cultural phenomenon; it was seen as atavistic, primitive, and distinctly unmodern. This is a naming that works through negation, an apposite resistance to the questions of agency, modernity, and progress coalesced under its sign.⁵

This essay reads Pritilata Waddedar alongside another theorist for whom *sati* offers a productive, if problematic, analytic of revolutionary desire: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. At the end of her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak relates the story of Bhuaneswari Bhaduri, a young woman of sixteen who hanged herself in Calcutta in 1926. She writes, “The suicide was a puzzle since, as Bhuaneswari was menstruating at the time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy. Nearly a decade later, it was discovered that she was a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She had finally been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust, she killed herself” (“Can” 103–4). Six years before Waddedar’s attack on the Pahartali Institute, Bhuaneswari⁶ is similarly charged with a task of anticolonial insurgency, the violence of which she displaces onto her own body.

These two women are sisters—quite literally—in arms. By outward appearances, they are remarkably similar: both young women from educated, middle-class families, both members of anticolonial revolutionary groups, both dead before the age of twenty-one. Indeed, both take their own lives and leave their bodies as signs. Their uncanny doubling, however, seems to end with the posthumous lives of those bodies. Bhuaneswari Bhaduri, unable or unwilling to carry out the assassination with which she is tasked, kills herself behind the shuttered doors of her home. From then on, her body and her life are obscured from our view, until Spivak encounters her ghostly presence by chance. Waddedar leads six men into the Pahartali Railway Institute and emerges with them, moments later, having helped to take the lives of three British subjects. She kills herself outside the steps of the building, in plain sight of the incoming police charge, her pockets

filled with political propaganda—publicly, we might say. From then on, her body is suspended in our view, the subject of paeans and proclamations and commemorations.

Of Bhuvanewari, Spivak writes that “[her] suicide is an unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide as much as the hegemonic account of the blazing, fighting, familial Durga” (“Can” 104). In describing Bhuvanewari’s suicide as unemphatic, she suggests a negation of the illocutionary force of emphasis: a stilled, or unacting, speech that is nonetheless precise and motivated. Much scholarly attention has been paid to Spivak’s use of *subaltern* in reference to Bhuvanewari. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan argues that Bhuvanewari’s suicide is precisely what produces her subalterneity, her spectral place at the margins of memory; her death provides the condition of possibility for rewriting the social script of *sati* and of the heroic mother-goddess (“Death” 119). For Rajan, she refuses, with her dead body, the narration of her death under particular terms (illicit pregnancy) and refuses, with her silence, the narration of her death by other terms (heroism or patriotism). Bhuvanewari’s death, when read through her revolutionary affiliations, might have been subsumed within a masculinist discourse of idealized and idolized mythic femininity, if not for what Spivak identifies as her hermeneutic resistance.

Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, in waiting for the onset of menstruation to hang herself, makes her body into a sign. It avers at once her commitment to the nationalist cause and the failure of her mission. It refuses the preemptive etiology of her suicide or any attempt at a political or psychological autopsy. This “displacing gesture” destabilizes the processes of signification; her body so inscribed by intent cannot be read (Spivak, “Can” 104). This is, for Spivak, the condition of subalterneity: the semiotic violence through which signals can only ever be misread.

Pritilata Waddedar, like Bhuvanewari, makes her body a sign. It registers vividly the nature of her protest, a disruptive, agrammatical iteration of resistance. But to take seriously the purposefulness of her intent, the figuring of a bodily politics of protest requires that we not rest in the moment of deconstructive ellipsis. It demands that we recognize and register that protest, the signal that has not gone astray in the nearly eighty years that separate us from its articulation. Waddedar, dead outside the place in which she took three lives as part of a campaign of anticolonial insurrection, makes her body speak.

She rewrites the social text of *sati* in order to articulate, quite emphatically, a form of political protest that recognizes its own futurity.

Waddedar uncannily predicts the ways in which her actions and intents will come to be narrativized and ventriloquized—that she will become victim and goddess—within familiar narratives of either criminal violence or nationalist sacrifice. Neither widowed nor set ablaze in self-annihilation, she marks her act as an iteration of *sati* that repeats with a difference its constituent parts, disengaging it from the pyre and grafting it to the body of political protest.

Sati, in this iteration, is an allegory by which the actions and desires of the present are preserved for future witnesses. Paul de Man writes that “it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority” (de Man, “Rhetoric” 227). Temporally and representationally discontinuous, *sati* as allegory of female revolutionary violence offers the illusion of coherence that recognizes itself as illusory: it abides by the distance from the site of the pyre and resists the nostalgic reach of identification toward the widow on the pyre.

Allegory preserves, necessitates, and mobilizes the distance between sign and substance and in so doing reveals itself as a rhetorical device in the service of narrativization. As an allegorical sign, *sati* draws an abjected and outdated signifier from the historical past in the service of making intelligible to the future a present condition of political possibility. Moreover, noncontiguous with its referent, *sati*'s allegorical function causes its iteration by Waddedar to appear as a kind of catachresis, the grotesque superimposition of a false word. It startles, halts even, the signifying chain with its aberrance: malapropism frustrates and therein restarts the process of meaning making on new ground.

Catachresis demands, by its violence, recognition; it disrupts by exposing language's tropism toward narrative and coherence. Catachresis, Derrida writes, demands “another kind of writing, a violent writing which stakes out the faults (*failles*) and deviations of language; so that the text produces a language of its own, in itself, which while continuing to work through tradition emerges at a given moment as a *monster*, a monstrous mutation without tradition or normative precedent” (“Deconstruction” 154). The temporal infraction of the apparent catachresis—the monstrosity of the reanimated dead body of *sati* grafted onto the body of the female revolutionary violence—in the allegorical mode does the work of both defamiliarization and displacement. Belatedly, incongruously, and ambiguously, *sati* as

an allegorical sign for political protest produces a new, deformed language of consent and will.

The colonial contestation around *sati* was waged not only in the arena of social intervention by missionaries but also in the courtroom, as the colonial authorities sought to codify it through legal circular and, eventually, in the Indian penal code. The legal consequences turned on whether the woman wanted to live or die, whether she wanted to be saved or forsaken, whether she was subjugated or freed by the act of self-immolation. Thereby, what comes to be at stake is the ability of the law to determine a (often dead) woman's agency and desire. Colonial and anticolonial arguments about *sati* have depended on delimiting the "native" domestic space and the colonial incursion into that space. "Saving" women brought them into the public space of colonial conflict, away from that private space in which they might be said to want to die. On the pyre, the private wife was made the public goddess. *Sati* as allegory for political violence thus destabilizes that false division as women spectacularly immolate themselves in the name of anticolonialism, a nod to the ways in which colonial intervention into the practice of *sati* cleared that ground in the first place.

In recognizing the ambivalences and incongruities between the letter of their utterance and the spirit of its form, these women destabilize the liberal paradigm of consent, offering their bodies as templates for political dissent that is never outside the coercive orbit of power. The evidentiary reaches of the criminal code here overlap uncomfortably with the terms of historical memory. As a consequence, the allegory of *sati* for an act of political protest that destroys the body is a situated strategy of naming that also keeps the archive in its sights, drawing upon the resources of the past to make visible, if not entirely legible, a revolutionary action in the present. In particular, Waddedar's re-marking of *sati*, the difference of the repetition, names it as a revolutionary practice and simultaneously reconstitutes the relationship between self-annihilation and protest. It asks, in another tongue, how a woman's death—her choice to die—might come to be read.

Waddedar and other women embedded in revolutionary communities were caught in a representational double bind: their participation in anticolonial violence served to reify, simultaneously and paradoxically, two competing masculinist, hegemonic discourses. As a result, Waddedar recognizes an incongruity between her revolutionary insurgency and the conditions of possibility of its memorialization. She suggests, from within the cloister of the irreconcilable, a historicist hermeneutic by which to know her, quite literally, by another name. This speaking otherwise makes possible a

resistance to the normative force of narrative; it is the insistence on a form of protest that will not and cannot be completely subsumed within, and exhausted by, hegemonic discourses. In turn, it makes possible a feminist historiographic practice that refuses legibility and coherence as its ambition and instead abides by an ethics of indecipherability.

Voluntary Culpable Homicide, by Consent

Bina Das, in her court confession to the attempted assassination of Bengal governor Stanley Jackson in May 1932, declared, “I only sought the way to death by offering myself at the feet of my country and invite the attention of all by my death as a mark of a most immaculate form of protest against the situations created by the repressive measures of the government, which can unsex even a frail woman like myself, brought up in all the best traditions of Indian womanhood.” Das’s reference to “all the best traditions of Indian womanhood,” as Purnima Bose has argued, is a pointed and intentional allusion to the ur-site of contestation between Indian tradition and colonial governance: *sati* (130–31). By describing her intended death as an “immaculate form of protest” in the courtroom, Das evokes the specter of the widow on the pyre, whose consent and will were the terms by which colonial authorities sought to legislate and regulate domestic practices. All prosecutions of *sati* were thereby political, the management by colonial forces of a competing system of power. In describing the intent of her political protest in the language of Indian tradition, Das resexes herself into a new kind of public womanhood, a rebirth on the pyre.

The nineteenth-century codification into law of *sati* as a punishable offense represented a paradigm shift in colonial governance, an incursion into the hitherto inviolable realm of “native tradition.” In this section, I argue that, in instituting a juridical index by which the desires of Indian women were to be identified and registered, *sati* legislation prescribed and regulated a new public language of consent. It is this language, and the impossible calculus of determining will that the legislation demanded, that invites its iteration by revolutionary women decades later. In the history of its codification, as I trace below, the consent of women takes on increasingly significant evidentiary status, as the courts negotiate the ways in which the desire to die might function as a legal category of analysis. In creating new subjects of colonial oversight, the legislation created new avenues through which those subjects engaged with power. As a consequence, for these anticolonial insurgents of the 1930s, it offers a gendered vocabulary for sacrifice that is always already political.

The legal debates around the practice of *sati* turned on the ability of colonial officials to hear and to read the utterance and performance of the will to die by women—or, more to the point, the failure of that representability. The statute depended upon a basic opacity of a desire made public in order to effectively legislate against the practice of widow-immolation. This is to say that the development and codification of the prohibition of *sati* strained against the bounds of what constituted the agential, desiring, rational subject of law in death. The widow who would be a *sati* was the test subject for this experiment in subjectivity: the terms of female desire and consent emerge simultaneously with the possibility of her death. Ania Loomba writes, “[T]he sati’s ‘power’ lies in her will to die and comes into being only when she expresses that will” (221). In turning to *sati* as an allegory for political violence, female revolutionaries of the 1930s revise the irreducible agon between desire and coercion, legibility and resistance into a strategic ambivalence that interrupts and frustrates totalizing narratives of heroism or victimhood.

In the days leading up to the attack on the Pahartali Institute, Pritilata Waddedar wrote compulsively, justifying to loved ones in letters and to herself (and perhaps a future audience) in her diary the violence she was about to enact. In these writings, she looks toward embodying a form of self-negating politics of futurity. This articulation of protest through self-annihilation resurrects the specter of the *sati* debate as a contestation over the form and intent of women’s lives and deaths. To her mother, she writes, “Mother, did you call me? [. . .] Pardon me, mother, I have given you great pain. I offer my blood to wipe the tears of the motherland. You bless me, or my desire will not be fulfilled. Forgive me, mother, pardon me today” (qtd. in Mukherjee 69). Born of two mothers, one who will suffer for the violence to be done and one for whom that violence is to be done, Waddedar constructs an intimate fluid-exchange of sacrifice, one in need of maternal expiation. The desire in danger of being unfulfilled is elliptic, an unspoken aspiration, that nonetheless appears at the horizon of representation as a kind of blessed sacrifice: immolation.

Etymologically, immolation is the act by which a sacrifice is made holy; it is a meaning-making supplement to an act of violence or loss. From the Latin, *immolare*, to sprinkle with sacrificial meal, “to immolate” is defined in the *OED* as: “To sacrifice, offer in sacrifice; to kill as a victim.” Self-immolation is the making sacrificial victim of oneself. In Bengali, this is translated as either *atmahuti*, আত্মাহুতি, or more commonly and precisely, *atmabalidan*, আত্মবলিদান. Where *huti* is sacrificial fire itself, *balidan* is the

offering, *dan*, of *bali*, the sacrificial beast. In the case of both these compound words, the object of the act is the *atma*, translated as self but a self not bound to the physical form of the mortal body. In the Vedic tradition, *atma*, unlike *jiva* the living being, is an articulation of the self, “I am” that is beyond the phenomenological. Thus, the sacrifice of *atma* is the offering up of a self beyond the body, a self-annihilation of which the self cannot be annihilated. To self-immolate, in this context, is to destroy the self at the level of performativity and not materiality. Nonetheless, this is a performance rooted in the body, in its sensation and its corporeality. Consider the Sanskrit *vahnipatana* वह्नपितन, meaning self-immolation more generally, and *agnipravezana* अग्नपिर्वेशन, widow-immolation. *Vahni* allotropically signifies both fire and desire; the *patana* collapse into it as an erotic dehiscence. Even the widow, cast onto the pyre as dissipated remainder of conjugality, is offered in the Sanskrit something of somatic repair: the holy fire of *agni* contains within it the spacious agnosticism of *pravezana* as entrance, penetration, or sexual intercourse. The destruction of the mortal body upon the pyre strains toward the possibility of pleasure that lacerates the sensate form, an ambivalent recompense.

In Vedic mythology, the goddess Sati, from whom the practice draws its name and whose name it bestows upon its supplicants (immolated widows are offered the appellation *Sati Mata*, the purified mother), is a manifestation of the divine feminine creative force, *Shakti*. Born the daughter of Daksha, she defies him to marry Lord Shiva, the destroyer, and is banished. Despite being repudiated by her family, she then returns to her natal home to attend a sacrificial worship to which neither she nor her husband have been invited and endures her father’s relentless aspersions of Shiva. Renditions of the story thereafter vacillate between Sati as ashamed or enraged or both, but they all agree that Sati, affectively overcome, sets herself alight—to punish her father and free herself, with an accompanying prayer that she be reborn to a more worthy father. Not mourning widow but blazing wife, Sati’s self-destruction is retributive and reparative, spectacular and indicting, setting off its own divine violence. Shiva, undone by grief and rage at Sati’s death, slices off Daksha’s head (replacing it with that of the goat who originally was to be sacrificed), and with Sati’s charred corpse on his shoulders, begins his awesome *tandava*, the divine dance of destruction.⁷ He reenacts upon the world the violence Sati inflicted on herself—turned outward under the guise of mourning—such that her self-sacrifice is the impetus for his cataclysmic rage. Hers is a ground-clearing self-immolation: she makes possible Shiva’s righting of the world with the destruction of her mortal body.

The double derivation of the word *sati*—the feminized form of the Sanskrit *sat*, meaning true or pure, and the mythological, referring to the goddess—bears witness to the ways in which notions of feminine power depend on a kind of ontological clarity. Sati’s power as a feminine idol comes from her self-destruction; the pure expression of agency begins and ends with a moment of self-annihilation. Sati is able to choose to die precisely because she is pure; her self-destruction in turn retrospectively validates her worth as daughter and divine consort. A similarly spectacular transformation is at work in the logic of the pyre: the widow, having expressed a form of purity in her ostensible choice to die, is reborn as the immortal and insensate goddess. The translation of myth into ritual, however, participates in its own counterfactual reimagining of the goddess Sati, who was a wife, not a widow. The retributive force of Sati’s self-annihilation is translated into a recuperative futurity for future generations, whose karma has been purified by the widow’s sacrifice.

The practice of *sati*, and the threat of its prevalence, looms large in the colonial discourse of the early nineteenth century. I trace the history of its regulation at length below in order to draw attention to the systematic incorporation of gendered affect and intent into the purview of colonial regulation. The legal history of *sati*’s prohibition and the terms by which it regulated the conditions and possibilities of consent for women provide the de facto template for the colonial state’s subsequent logic of what constituted a female subject under the law. This is to say that the revolutionary women of the 1930s who evoke *sati* are already proleptically subjects under the epistemological and surveillance apparatus institutionalized by its regulation.

An 1812 circular drafted by the Sadar Nizamat Adalat, the criminal court system created by the 1793 Cornwallis Code, declared *sati*, in the manner of other religious practices, allowed wherever sanctioned by religious officials. This followed the general rule of the Nizamat Adalat to allow, and indeed preserve, the sovereignty of religious practice. However, the circular, responding to growing British anxiety about the possible prevalence of the practice, offered the caveat of a newly erected category of illegal *sati* wherein the woman to be burned was either compelled, intoxicated, pregnant, or had young children for whose care provisions had not been made (Mani 31). Though these are all potentially exceptional cases, the revision introduced into colonial policy a standard of consent, implicitly criminalizing *sati* by naming its potential victims: the unwilling or unaware wife and her children, all rewritten as innocent—indeed, unconscious—victims of a native tradition newly subject to legal scrutiny.

In 1817, the Nizamat Adalat anxiously returned to the subject to further amend the *sati* policy to allow for additional government oversight of the act; relatives of the widow were required to give prior notice of intent to authorities and allow them to determine the consent and legality of the intended immolation. The court stressed that, in the case of an “illegal” *sati*, the widow would not be the subject of punishment; indeed, it stated its intention to afford protection to widows who might withdraw from the *sati*. The Nizamat Adalat’s 1817 stance toward the category of illegal *sati* licensed the establishment of a surveillance apparatus that not only witnessed the act of immolation but also sought to record its attendant affects and intents. This revolutionary shift away from a long-standing British noninterventionist policy in matters of “native culture” coincided with a more comprehensive shift in colonial policy toward bodies and health.⁸

The sharp rise in mortality rates in Bengal between 1812 and 1817, due in large part to the first recorded cholera epidemic, implicitly undergirded the second Nizamat Adalat circular on *sati*, as the nearly threefold increase in reported cases of *sati* suggested to colonial officials a warrant to intervene. That the new policy on *sati* included a structure by which colonial bodies might be surveilled and affects rationalized into intent points to the ways in which anxieties about uncontrollable bodies pervaded all facets of colonial policy. The 1829 Bengal Regulation of Sati culminated this regulatory effort by declaring all *sati* illegal and unjustifiable.

The 1829 regulation introduced a new language of paternalism and benevolent oversight into the British colonial vocabulary. Lord Bentinck, the regulation’s architect, writes in its preamble,

The practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, is revolting to the feelings of human nature; it is nowhere enjoined by the religion of the Hindus as an imperative duty [and] in some extensive districts it does not exist: in those in which it has been most frequent it is notorious that in many instances acts of atrocity have been perpetrated which have been shocking to the Hindus themselves, and in their eyes unlawful and wicked. The measures hitherto adopted to discourage and prevent such acts have failed of success, and the governor-general in council is deeply impressed with the conviction that the abuses in question cannot be effectually put an end to without abolishing the practice altogether. (267)

Appealing first to a universalized feeling, the regulation suggests a dual logic for the shift in official policy. On the one hand, there is an appeal to culture-driven governance—even Hindus, whose cultural practice it ostensibly is, find it reprehensible. On the other hand, it insists that all attempts to keep colonial policy outside the realm of culture by delineating some aspects of the practice legal and others traditional have proved inadequate to curbing it. The regulation entered into nearly uncharted waters by drawing the force of religious doctrine into legal discourse, a quarantine that had hitherto been scrupulously upheld.

Lata Mani and Jeannette Herman have both argued that the language of feeling evoked in Bentinck's preamble reveals the true subject of the regulation's force to be not the women themselves but the idea of Indian (figured here and throughout the historical and scholarly inquiry into *sati* as Hindu) tradition as outside of and impervious to colonial administration (Mani, "Contentious"; Herman; "Men"). Indian women, long figured in nationalist discourse as the emblems and protectors of authentic native culture, are figured by the transitive logic of Bentinck's preamble as already resisting—finding "repulsive"—the act by which their gender is simultaneously being marked.⁹ The dissolution of the tradition-law divide recommended by the 1829 regulation was met with fierce opposition by Brahmin pundits and nationalist leaders alike, the results of which are evident in the 1837 and 1860 drafts of the Indian Penal Code.

Until the 1837 drafting of the Indian Penal Code, criminal cases in British India were adjudicated by the Nizamat Adalat under a modified English Criminal Law and administered by presidencies. The First Law Commission, led by Thomas Babington Macaulay—best known for his "1835 Minute on Indian Education"—sought to offer a more comprehensive and, indeed, contextualized legal language for a region that was proving ever more unruly for East India Company rule.¹⁰ Though it was submitted to the governor-general of India in 1837, however, it was not codified until twenty years later, following the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the dissolution of East India Company rule, and the beginning of direct rule under the Crown as the British Raj.¹¹

The 1837 draft of the penal code included, under crimes related to the body, a crime called voluntary culpable homicide by consent as a mitigation of the charge of murder. In its title, the statute announces two categories of adjudicated bodies: those who give their consent to be killed and those who intentionally take the lives of the former. The statute states that a crime is "voluntary culpable homicide by consent, when the person

whose death is caused, being above twelve years of age, suffers death, or takes the risk of death, by his own choice,” and it offers four provisions intended to confirm the consent, rationality, and intentionality of both the subject toward whom the crime is committed and the attendant culpability of the charged offender. First, the subject of the crime must not have been “induced” by the offender into the act which results in death; second, she must be of the age, rationality, and intelligence to “understand the nature and consequences” of her choice; third, if the subject was indeed induced, then the charged person cannot have known or participated in that coercion; finally, the charged person must not have withheld information that might have caused the subject of the crime to have changed her mind (Statute 298). If all of these conditions were met, the crime of murder was mitigated and deemed the lesser offense of voluntary culpable homicide by consent.

The only example of voluntary culpable homicide by consent that the statute goes on to offer makes clear that the mitigation of murder is not by “his own choice” but by hers: “Z, a Hindoo widow, consents to be burned with the corpse of her husband. A kindles the pile. Here A has committed voluntary culpable homicide by consent” (Statute 298). The illustration serves to make explicit the intent of a statute that intervened outside the purported strictures of colonial law—into the arena of culture.¹² Moreover, it renders desire into law as an evidentiary category, the determinate factor of consent. What is in fact being codified into law is the legibility by colonial officials of the desires of women, the ability of government to recognize and institutionalize affect and intent. The law argues that consent must be legible, and if it refuses or disappoints that epistemological demand it is invalid. The regulation of the practice of *sati* herein functions as the systemization of a particularly gendered affect, the production of state knowledge about its female subjects, and the pathologization of intent.

The very giving of consent, within the logic of the law, is an articulation of desire—“I want.” The translation of the practice of *sati* into the legalistic condition of voluntary culpable homicide by consent literalizes the logic by which the crime will be adjudicated. The conscious, legal act of giving consent exposes the widow to the scrutiny, and autopsy, of affects not explicitly coded within the law. Macaulay, in the “Introductory Report upon the Indian Penal Code,” writes that the penal code “will be at once a statute book and a collection of decided cases [. . .]. Our illustrations are never intended to supply any omission in the written law, nor do they ever, in our opinion, put a strain on the written law” (423). The illustration of the widow on the pyre thus serves as a mobilizing supplement to the code itself,

tiptoeing a legal tightrope between omission and strain.¹³ The practice of *sati* is marked as the object of the spirit of the law, while it remains unuttered in the letter of the law—the shibboleth of an interventionist, civilizationalist state.

Voluntary culpable homicide by consent does more than offer a mandate to regulate a domestic practice; it authorizes the regulation of will itself. Consent is the mitigating condition of the crime—it is otherwise murder—but is never exculpatory. Evidence of consent on the part of the widow to die on the pyre can never exonerate the defendant. However, as the punitive difference between the two crimes is substantial, with murder a capital crime, the intelligibility of consent could represent the difference between life and death.¹⁴ The mitigation of *sati* culpability thus rests at the heart of this statute, intended as retributive punishment without any deterrent value.

The retributive value of the statute returns us squarely to the provisions of its mitigation: the juridical indexes of its harm and its propitiation. The illustration offered of the widow Z on the pyre, assisted by A, toward whom the punitive force of law is aimed, is followed by two illustrations of crimes that do not meet the preconditions of the law: the assisted suicide of a child under twelve and a suicide brought on by deception. In each of those cases, there is inadequate consent. Voluntary culpable homicide by consent is intended both to offer legal recognition to the act of *sati* and to legislate against the men who participate in it. The language of consent in the very title of the statute serves as a stand-in for a far more complex and ambivalent politics of choice.

The double “voluntary” and “by consent” in the statute suggests the impossibility of an act that is uncoerced or uncompelled by another person. The statute suggests, in fact, the legal impossibility of female consent, even as it provides a juridical rationale for its failure. The act is committed when the subject, male, induces the victim, female, to “voluntarily” put herself to death. The use of the word *induce*, meaning to bring about an action of the body or will of another, is to circumscribe the condition of choice. Even in cases where “consent” can be proven, the accused party is still guilty of “inducement,” an impingement on the apparently spontaneous free will of the widow—a negation of the possibility of pure consent. The law follows a definition of consent wherein it is the “voluntary agreement to or acquiescence in what another proposes or desires; compliance, concurrence, permission” (*OED*). Grammatically, this form of consent cannot exist without another, another’s will, another’s desire. What one consents to must be outside oneself. By that legalistic logic, it stands to reason that

the person consented to is the actual subject of juridical intent. The woman who has climbed onto the pyre has died, rendering her outside legal control. Furthermore, the paternalistic rationale of the law, aimed at protecting the widow from her family and religious community, was not designed to punish the body to which harm was seen as being done. Nonetheless, hers is a transitional body in the traffic of the culpable. Despite the ostensible legislation against *sati*, there cannot be an act of widow immolation in which the subject of the judicial disciplining force is the one whose body is at stake: the woman on the pyre is always already an indirect object of law.

The assertion of consent as an evidentiary category is something of a red herring; it draws our attention to a possibility of legible desire that is proleptically foreclosed. Positing consent as the sole mitigating circumstance of a crime, which might on the surface invite contemporary comparisons to assisted suicide debates, operated in the case of *sati* as a sanction to determine the impossibility of consent. To put it baldly, colonial officials (and postcolonial scholars) did not believe it possible that a woman would ever want to die by way of immolation, of her own volition. Thus, the colonial official called to witness the *sati* was charged first to determine the explicit consent of the widow: she was asked to speak the words of affirmation and autonomy.

Thereafter, the evidentiary index of her consent shifts from the declarative to the indicative: after the articulation of the consent to die, the widow had to be scrutinized for any symptom of either coercion or hesitation. The spoken word of consent had to be corroborated by bodily evidence of desire. A constative rather than performative speech act, the utterance of “I will” or “I want” required the evidentiary supplement of demonstration. The body of the woman becomes an evidentiary object separate from the expression of her consent, a queer Cartesian split rendered in the law. The woman’s body is here not an envelope of her cogito but a potentially resistant and indicting entity in and of itself. Should she sway or falter on the way to the pyre or, when upon it, cry out in pain, her body would be seen to betray some truth hidden by her utterance of will. Jeanette Herman argues that “in order for the practice to fall under the definition of legal *sati*, the widow’s burning must be an expression of her own will. In British accounts of *sati*, however, there is often a slippage from consent to desire, so that regardless of spoken consent, witnesses either based findings of legality or illegality, or of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ *satis*, on their readings of the widow’s desire, or else lamented the law’s definition of consent in the face of ambiguous desire” (“Men” 232). The codification into law of an evidentiary index of consent depends on the legibility of desire; illegible desire is otherwise the marker of nonconsent.

This index of evidence relies intimately on several interconnected fallacies, first, that “consent” was ideationally and structurally available to women beyond the act of *sati* itself. Not only did the woman facing the pyre have to be represented as a rational actor in possession of her faculties, she was also expected to have rationalized the act of self-immolation by way of analogy: the choice to die is like the choice to live. A second fallacy was that coercion, if present, could be identified, individuated, and corroborated. The subject of the statute’s punitive force had to be determined as having had both the intimacy and power to influence the will of the widow. Finally, and most significantly, the coexistence of coercion and desire had to be understood as impossible. The widow could not, in straitened circumstances, still want to die. Not only does this final assumption of the law privilege living as the rational choice, it does so from within a Judeo-Christian tradition of the determination of mortality. This is to say, it predicates itself on a common understanding of the limits of life and the effect of destruction of the body as death.

In the statute, consent is only realized belatedly and posthumously. Assuming the death of a woman on the pyre, it is only in her absence that her consent to the burning is rendered meaningful in the context of the legal system. For colonial authorities, the widow on the pyre is a death-bound subject, whereas for the Brahmanic pundits who most vigorously protested the legislation, she is a birth-bound subject—indeed, she is a goddess-bound subject. Spivak writes, “The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice. [. . .] The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of ‘White men saving brown women from brown men.’ Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: ‘the women actually want to die’” (“Can” 93). We might revise that parody to say, “The woman actually wanted to become a goddess.” In this reformulation, the widow-to-be-immolated is offered a kind of remuneration for her symbolic and physical labor.

This is not to assert that women facing *sati* wanted to die in order to be deified but instead to refuse the contest of meaning making over her body and her will as the only terms of her consent. Somewhere between wanting to be saved and wanting to die, the woman speaks from the pyre. The key, according to Spivak, is not to ask what she says. Instead, we are to consider how, in the triangulated bodily speech of *sati*, the body on fire that is subject to disputed meaning making resists the question of agency or desire that is intimately bound to the violence that make it visible. This

is a suggestion to imagine, outside the paternalistic fantasies in which the immolated widow is either made goddess or let live, the choices and intents that are called to account for the act of self-destruction.

The regulating function of the *sati* law attempts to make legible the desire of the Indian woman, an insidious violence that, in the guise of benevolence, makes bodies, psyches, intents, and desires available to administration and surveillance. That violence produces, not as debris but as justification, all that cannot be compelled into the logic of the subject, of the sentient, of the human. The discourse produces, as surely as does any tinder and ash and flame, the engulfed woman upon the pyre. Though the practice of *sati* existed prior to British colonial presence in India, the discourse of *sati* is a colonial construction.¹⁵ The woman whose living body burned alongside a corpse was herself an object already dead, social agenesis itself. So, too, the performance of rescuing her was a stillborn endeavor, a necromantic politics.

Nearly a century after *sati*'s prohibition in the law, Pritilata Waddedar also necromances the widow's body, an allegorical iteration in the service not of salvation but of disruption. This disruption is the discontinuous and incongruous kinship forged between the revolutionary terrorist and the immolated widow, a relationality that emerges precisely from the gap between sign and substance and thereby reveals the instability of that sign. The multiple, unreliable, and contested conditions of being a *sati* offer an appropriately fugitive referent for the condition of being a female revolutionary. That which is intended to secure meaning, to offer a stable referent, refuses narrative and hermeneutic discipline. De Man writes, "Allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read" (*Allegories* 205). The allegorical narrative tells the story of the insistence on reading as a totalizing epistemology, of its failure, and of the strategic illegibility that this failure might produce. *Sati* comes to serve Waddedar rhetorically as a hermeneutic cloak, imbuing the articulation of political protest with the legacy of always already disputed female agency and choice: a politics of illegibility.

For Waddedar and her female comrades, the willingness to die for the cause of national freedom, or for the cause of a generation of rebels yet to come, was already expressed in a gendered idiom. In "Long Live Revolution," Waddedar writes, "History is replete with plenty of examples of how Rajput women fought with unsurpassed bravery on the battlefield and how they did not flinch a bit from destroying the enemy for freedom of the country and for upholding the dignity of women. Then why should we, the women

of present-day India, not join the great war for liberating the country from the chains of slavery imposed by the foreigners?” (266). Her invocation of Rajput heroism carries a double valence. While the image of Rajput warrior women charging into battle is a potent one, it cannot be disassociated from another historical image of Rajput battle: women committing *jauhar*, mass self-immolation to avoid “defilement.” This is a militant female violence, self-directed and self-protective.

The proximity of Rajput women to battle meant that their lives were also otherwise endangered—as was, more to the point, their purity. Accounts of *jauhar* vary between those in which Rajput women, seeing their men’s certain defeat in battle, preemptively killed themselves to prevent becoming the object of sexual violence by their victorious foes and those in which they are put to death by their kinsmen in advance of war to similarly prevent the loss of their honor. Unlike its common analogy, *sati*, *jauhar* is represented as an exceptional condition of war and not an indication of social depravity. *Jauhar* functions within a paternalistic logic wherein harm is mitigated by preventing the possibility of dishonor.

As a trope of female militancy that turns on self-destruction, *juahar* offers a charismatic and local example for the revolutionary women of Bengal. It is a politicized self-annihilation from within the social text of their lives. Kalpana Dutt, Waddedar’s closest friend and only female comrade in the IRA, writes of herself and Waddedar, “Sometimes we used to dream of becoming great scientists. Then the Rani of Jhansi fired our imagination with her example. Sometimes we used to think of ourselves as fearless revolutionaries” (32). Laxshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi, who led a rebellion against the East India Company during the 1857 Indian Rebellion, is perhaps the most famous image of the Indian woman warrior. Killed during the battle, her body later found burned, the Rani of Jhansi is often eulogized as a *sati*, particularly in the oral tradition of Rajput women. Lindsey Harlan argues, “For those women who believe that she must have retreated from the battlefield at the last moment to immolate herself, the Rani of Jhansi is literally a *sati*. For those who know that the queen was slain on the battlefield, she is *sati* by analogy. In either case, her death is adjudged unselfish sacrifice. It manifests her goodness, her *sat*. It therefore accomplishes what self-immolation accomplishes: it validates her *pativrata* status” (192). Proof of the Rani’s *pativrata*, sacred wifely devotion, is belatedly offered by her death in battle. *Sati* as a demonstration of purity and devotion, the destroying of one’s mortal body as an allegiance to another, is transported from the pyre to the battlefield.

It is a curious paradox that makes the Rani's radicalism intelligible and unnarratable by the fundamentally conservative principle of wifely sacrifice. Her goodness, her *sat*, is that of a proper wife. Though she fights for the people of the principality to which she is given control following her husband's death, the logic of her death belatedly animates her identity as wife not sovereign. Nonetheless, the Rani of Jhansi's enduring legacy in the national imagination as an image of the blazing female heroine presents an alluring form of revolutionary possibility for Waddedar and Dutt who, at twenty, dreamed of being either scientists or insurgents. With no husband, alive or dead, Waddedar is *sati* to a cause, a ghostly nonhuman marriage. In announcing her imminent self-destruction as a form of self-immolation, evoking the allegory of *sati* as a revolutionary tactic of protest, Waddedar eerily prophesies the ways in which she will, in death, come to be memorialized and adjudicated on those very terms.

“Girl, Believed to Be Mesmerised”

In the flurry of newspaper accounts and police records of the attack on the Pahartali Institute in 1932, Pritilata Waddedar's body shuttles in and out of view, its condition, clothing, and position documented, revised, and revisited. A year later, during the trial, her remains are recollected: “A little later witness found Pritilata Waddedar's body in male attire, some distance west of the Institute. Witness seized the property found on Waddedar's person, namely, printed notices of ‘Indian Republican Army,’ three photos of Ramkrishna Biswas, a plan of the Pahartali Institute, three cartridges and a manuscript statement with Ramkrishna's photo, a whistle and a photo of Sree Krishna and a leather belt near her head. [. . .] Witness then produced the Chemical Examiner's report detecting potassium cyanide in Pritilata's viscera” (“Arrest”). Her body becomes a part of the inventory of forensic evidence collected and catalogued at the scene.

That body, twenty years old, dressed in a *dhoti*, shirt, and *chadar*, hair covered with a handkerchief, avails itself by its death to the colonial gaze. When its outward condition fails to adequately narrate the who, what, when, and why of its death, her body is dissected at the district police station in autopsy, her very viscera coaxed into offering evidence. By way of its atomization, her body offers the how and when of its own destruction: she died immediately by ingesting potassium cyanide. The incisive eye of coloniality also determines the identity of the body laid on its morgue slab: since she had graduated from Bethune College, Calcutta, that year,

her name and age were readily available to authorities seeking to confirm that the body belonged to the woman who had eluded police capture after the June killing of Captain Cameron—two weeks after her graduation with honors.¹⁶ Only left is the why, to which a ready response comes in the form of the manifesto pinned to her chest that began, “I boldly declare myself as a revolutionary, whose ideal is to liberate MOTHER India from the British Rule” (qtd. in M. Chatterjee, *Do* 257). In her own hand, Pritilata Waddedar names herself and her actions: revolutionary.

On that body that is to die, four pictures: three of Ramkrishna Biswas, the IRA leader who was hanged earlier that year for the assassination of Inspector Tarini Chatterjee, and one of the Lord Krishna, whose gospel in the *Gita* is that of righteous war. The form of self-memorialization that Waddedar performs is subsequently elided from view by the competing narration of her actions and memory by colonial officials and by her own compatriots. To borrow a phrase from Spivak, Waddedar’s allegorical rewriting of the *sati* script is interrupted by two hegemonic, paternalistic accounts: *sati*, according to the criminal logic of voluntary culpable homicide by consent, and the “blazing, fighting, familial Durga” (“Can” 104).

In February 1933, five months after Waddedar’s death, authorities finally arrested Surya Sen after he was given up by the family in whose house he had been hiding. For three years, Sen had eluded authorities as the suspected leader of the Chittagong Armoury raids. When the case came to trial, Sen, Tarkeswar Dastidar, and Kalpana Dutt were charged with conspiracy to wage war against the king and “other crimes” (“High Court” 439). Though Sen was suspected of being the leader and mastermind of the 1930 Armoury Raid and the years of subsequent insurgent violence, the primary evidence lodged against him depended upon his relationship with Waddedar despite her not having joined the IRA until more than a year into its insurgency.

As I will suggest here, the court case against Surya Sen for conspiracy reenacts the juridical script of *sati*; it readjudicates the crime of voluntary culpable homicide by consent. Whereas for Waddedar, *sati* functions as allegory, as a sign that “points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference,” in the court case against Sen, Dastidar, and Dutt, *sati* is stripped of its allegorical function and is instead pressed into service of the thematization of simultaneity and similarity (de Man, “Rhetoric” 299). The Crown, in calling Pritilata Waddedar as ghostly star witness against Sen, reanimates the evidentiary status of coercion and desire, of mesmerism and control. In so doing, it reveals, on the one hand, the inherent politicization of *sati* prosecution in the

nineteenth century and, on the other, the intimate logic of political violence in the twentieth century. If, at heart, *sati* prosecution sought to constrain the influence of a competing patriarchal system of governance by incorporating the will of women to live or to die, its morphological reemergence in Sen's trial demonstrates the continuing—and indeed, intensified—anxiety over a governmental inability to parse or police those desires.

Pritilata Waddedar is intimately and multiply reanimated in the court proceedings, as her meticulously kept diary—seized from her parents' home when the police informed them of her death—is atomized into evidentiary snippets in order to indict the man who authorities claimed was truly responsible for the violence she enacted.¹⁷ Waddedar's death renders her a particularly efficacious and charismatic form of demonstrative evidence because it destroys her as a responsive subject and ossifies her as a hermetic object. Unlike her living comrades standing trial with recourse to defense and to bear witness for themselves, Waddedar's body and her writings function within court proceedings in the manner of other evidence: available to narrative and to scrutiny, spoken for and argued against.

The intimacies that bound together members of the IRA as a revolutionary community newly signify in the courtroom as legal liabilities, affective indictments of complicity that are sharply pronounced during the only IRA trial in which women are charged. The court determines the culpability of both Waddedar and Dutt in terms of their relationships to the men on trial. Newspapers covering the trial carried rumors of romance, deliciously sublimated, between Dutt and Dastidar, Waddedar and Nirmal Sen, and, most prominently, Waddedar and Surya Sen. Without some kind of libidinous payoff, the papers imply, these women's actions would be unthinkable, unnatural.

For its part, the Crown eschews any explicit inquiry into the nature of the relationships between the men on trial and their female comrades. Instead, it relies on the rhetorical force of implication. The judgment issued against Sen, chronicling the case presented by his attorneys, enumerates the facts of the case to which he capitulated: "He further stated that documents found upon his person at the time of his arrest showed that he had been on terms of close association with one Pritilata Waddedar" ("High Court" 440). The "terms of close association" indicate both Waddedar's culpability and Sen's proximity to her—an association that clearly worked powerfully on her. Waddedar, we are to understand, was seduced. Like the illustration of the widow who is induced to self-immolate in the *sati* statute, Waddedar's will bears the mark of Sen's influence.

In November 1933, in the *Times of India*, on page 22, tucked in between a story on a marketplace fire and a before-and-after picture ad for Pepsodent toothpaste, the headline for the coverage of the trial read, “Girl, Believed to Be Mesmerised.” Waddedar, dead more than a year, and her suspended autonomy are central to the prosecution’s case. In a ghostly ventriloquism, British prosecutors read aloud for the court record words written by a woman who died wearing words that declared her intent “to LIBERATE MOTHER India from the British Rule” (qtd. in M. Chatterjee, *Do* 257).

[The prosecutor] referred to a document, purporting to be Pritilata’s version of the Dhalghat incident. In this document, Pritilata was alleged to have described the occurrence at the Dhalghat in the minutest detail. It seemed that she had been completely mesmerized by this person, under whose control she had come and whom she regarded as some kind of divinity. If this statement were relied upon, it would prove that she and Masterda, meaning Surya Sen, were at Dhalghat, that the shooting did take place, that Captain Cameron had been shot when he tried to go upstairs, and that both the accused succeeded in escaping after the incident. (“Girl”)

The conditional construction of evidence relies on her trustworthiness as posthumous witness and her insensibility as living actor. Mesmerized, Pritilata Waddedar is made a victim and ward of the very state she opposed with her life.¹⁸ The necromantic suspension of Waddedar’s will by this court account renders her nonagential (and compliant with state interests) and susceptible to harm. It is a discursive alibi for the ways in which she will be made to speak: diagnosed as having already yielded her consent and her intent to Sen, Waddedar is posthumously availed of the court’s protective intervention. She must be rescued, through the repetition of her voice by the Crown, from the grasp of her enchanter. But her deadness prevents her from being returned to herself, in a sense. Instead, she is preserved by colonial authorities as specter of accusation and indictment.

Surya Sen, though ostensibly a mesmerist imbued with power to assert his influence over Waddedar, to make her an instrument of his will, is necessarily paralyzed in the prosecution’s case. He is accused not of action but of influence that is only intelligible through the material and recognizable violence of another’s actions. The accusation of mesmerism, rather than ascribing Sen a supernatural and therefore uncontrollable power, pulls away the wizard’s curtain. The charge of conspiracy further allows the

Crown to build a case against Sen based on his influence and the violence it indirectly makes possible. In particular, to demonstrate Sen's culpability for the Pahartali attack that Waddedar and six uncharged accomplices carried out, the prosecution entered into evidence an essay that Sen wrote in memoriam. While Waddedar and her accomplices were charged as being guilty in body, Sen is charged with guilt of intent.

Capitalizing, perhaps, on the fortuitous coincidence of Waddedar's death and the annual celebration of the goddess Durga (Durga Puja), Sen's essay takes the holy day of Vijaya as its title and ostensible subject.¹⁹ Vijaya, or Vijaya Dashami, is the final day of Durga Puja, which celebrates her defeat of the demon Maheshasoor and her return from a brief stay on Earth—figured as her natal home—to her heavenly abode. On this day, statues of the goddess are submerged in rivers, symbolizing her return to her husband Shiva in Kailash. Her temporary earthly form washed away, Durga is at once victorious and vanquished.

The word *Vijaya*, which means “victory,” carries in it the bittersweet promise of annihilation; it is victory through self-sacrifice. In the essay, Sen figures himself the builder of idols, crafting from the clay of national attachment bodies that will fight and be destroyed. Sen writes,

I am the cause of so many lives celebrating their “Vijaya” farewell from life. I have sacrificed at the altar of freedom the youth who are like dolls of gold and made the bosoms of so many mothers empty. How many, oh how many, have I sent to internment, prisons, exile and life term in islands across the sea? I am the cause of cries of lamentation in household after household. The torture and repression of the government visited the land because of my deeds. How can I absolve myself of the responsibility for all these? (269)

According to Sen, his charisma and commitment to the motherland drive the youths to their deaths; they are not impelled by their own nationalist passions. He takes responsibility not only for their deaths but also for their actions: they are “dolls” and he sacrifices them. By declaring himself the cause of their deaths, Sen nudges the nation out of the frame such that these revolutionaries sacrifice their lives to him. Sen requires national attachment to function only peripherally to inspire his cadre; they are driven forth to sacrifice by love of him more than anything else. Diverging from the nationalist logic of sacrifice for the motherland, Sen makes himself both cause and source of violence.

In his view, the youths, and Waddedar in particular, work through and for him alone. He is the conduit to both national service and nationalist memorialization. The repetition of “I am the cause” in the first part of the essay functions not only as an admission of his culpability, as the British authorities claim in their case against Sen, but also as an acknowledgment of his authority (“High Court” 444). The youths who offer up their lives in the act of revolutionary violence, whom he names at the opening of his essay, are nonetheless marked as relatively anonymous foot soldiers, the cries of lamentation over their deaths undistinguished from one another. His claims of power and responsibility thus presage and invite the authorities’ investigation of his guilt.

Sen reserves his personalized eulogy for Waddedar, as he “remember[s] most intensely today that beautiful and spotlessly pure idol whom [he] had sent for immersion” (271). Her memorialization depends on the symbolic reduction of Waddedar into an idol. Moreover, Sen’s invocation of Waddedar marks a shift in the tone and direction of the essay; whereas before he had regretted the cries of lamentation he caused and wondered whether his turn to violence was justified, Waddedar’s death reifies, or perhaps justifies, his cause. He writes, “May her unprecedented self-immolation bring joy to my mind and make me all the more strong. May her reverence for me make me worthy of respect and never may the sorrow of losing her under any circumstances overwhelm such sense of joy” (272). Waddedar’s sacrifice only indirectly serves the nationalist cause, through the bodily conduit of Surya Sen, who, strengthened by her death, might continue his work for the nation.

Sen articulates a particular causal relationship in which Waddedar is not the source of his joy because of her accomplishments. Rather, her accomplishments are preemptively hallowed because of those attributes that Sen parallels between her and the goddess Durga: innocence, beauty, holiness. “Vijaya” thus becomes an obituary for Waddedar, for her singular death, which is persistently differentiated from those of the fallen male revolutionaries.

How do we read this obituary for an idol? Judith Butler argues that the obituary stands as a key apparatus of nation-building, “the means by which a life becomes or fails to become a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which a life becomes note-worthy” (34). The national object that is reified in “Vijaya” is the image of woman as holy and pure. This is an obituary, then, by another name: obituary as hymn. The real woman—inasmuch as we are able to talk about *real* women—is

evacuated from this memorialization, leaving only a shell of exemplarity. Waddedar's death is grievable because of her gender, noteworthy because she might serve as example for others. By invoking the singularity of her death, Sen demarcates the lives that will be counted by the nationalist memory that is being synchronically constructed by his essay.

Unlike the message that Sen intends in "Vijaya," in which he is the source and authority of Waddedar's action, the use of the essay in the trial repositions Waddedar as central: her violence makes it possible for Sen to be responsible for and guilty of actions to which he could not be physically tied.²⁰ While in "Vijaya," Sen takes both responsibility and credit for the imagined heroism of Waddedar's death, the prosecution's reading of the text offers him no such credit. Waddedar's death becomes the site of contested memory, a colonial power struggle over the representational power of a female body. If "Vijaya" is a form of nationalist memorialization through which Sen writes himself into history, the court documents of his trial are the imperial refusal of that form of memory. The documents entered into court evidence are archival traces of a contest between brown men and white men waged over Waddedar's life, her death, and her memory: a struggle for narrative dominance. Both narratives are invested in, but fundamentally unable to register, the conflicted terms of Waddedar's consent to die.

Waddedar's seemingly disjunctive invocation of an obsolete and counterfactual allegorical sign uncannily prefaces its subsequent repetition at trial. The iteration of the legal script of *sati* within the courtroom falters in the face of the evidentiary category of desire and its unstable legibility. It falters in the face of an articulation of protest that traffics in the language of will while evading the representational discipline of its narrativization. Waddedar's spectral presence in the courtroom, multiply evoked, multiply claimed, suggests the possibility of a resistant female subjectivity within and despite the masculinist economy of discursive mastery.

Talking to Ghosts

The assurance of transference gives way to the possibility of haunting, it is also true that for us the only figure

of the unconscious is that of a radical series of discontinuous interruptions.
—Spivak

While Waddedar's act of political protest comes prefigured for us as an act of revolutionary violence by her own words—"I boldly declare myself a revolutionary"—the violence inflicted on her body stands in for

additional violence against British bodies (qtd. in M. Chatterjee, *Do* 257). Though Surya Sen conflates her with the ready images of Bengal and Durga in “Vijaya,” Waddedar, by killing herself immediately after attacking the British members of the Pahartali Institute, suggests that her dead body might signify as another casualty of her own violence. The impossible and false dichotomy between wanting to be saved and wanting to die cannot contain a third possibility of identificatory violence. Rather than, or in addition to, being a spectacular embodiment of Indian female sacrifice, Waddedar’s dead body outside the building is a repetition (with difference) of the carnage inside. Her body, dressed in male attire but unmarked by outward signs of violence, presented an epistemological dilemma for colonial authorities who could not understand why this young woman was dead when her comrades fled unharmed.²¹ Once it was discovered that she died of suicide by cyanide, her death became incorporated into a narrative of revolutionary terrorism. But until the suicide was confirmed, her death could be read as collateral damage. That she inflicted it on herself is, then, even more striking as it offers up another way to read the body upon the pyre. Her suicide refuses the easy narratives of heroism and self-sacrifice while acting as a reminder of the violence and death she caused, an insistent articulation by a body slipping from the grips of mortality.

At the end of “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Spivak asserts a definitive answer to the title. “The subaltern,” she writes, “cannot speak” (104). Since the publication of the essay, Spivak has returned repeatedly to the scene of Bhuvaneshwari’s death, rewriting that suicide script over and over again. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), that script is sutured piecemeal to a revision of “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives,” written in the same year as “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” to form a section aptly titled “History”—referring both to colonial history and to the history of Spivak’s own intellectual investments. There, some fourteen years after Spivak decreed a hermeneutic veil over the subaltern woman, she draws it away and cloaks herself—confessing her overidentification with the sixteen-year-old she knew “through family connections,” her disappointment in Bhuvaneshwari’s kin, and her attachment to the hope that Bhuvaneshwari’s body might speak and be heard—in an acknowledgment of “despair.” Her famous declaration, she says, was “an inadvisable remark” (273).

The failure, the negation of the title, is thus not Bhuvaneshwari’s silence but the impossibility of its perception. A dropped signal. Static in the lines of history. The blame for this failed reception, for Spivak, is both systemic and personal: the intimacies of silence that bind Bhuvaneshwari’s

female relatives, the curious reader, and even Spivak herself; the older sister to whom Bhuvanewari addressed her suicide note, the great-niece who wears only cotton and heads a transnational corporation, the female Bengali philosopher whose early work was nearly identical to Spivak's own and who acted as ethnographic go-between. Women, Spivak tells us not unsympathetically, should have known better, done better, listened better. The ethics of violence and silence seep through the enveloping grip of familiarity and femininity. She writes that "the effort [Bhuvanewari] made to write or speak her body was in the accents of accountable reason, the instrument of self-conscious responsibility. Still her Speech Act was refused. She was made to unspeak herself posthumously, by other women" (273). The curious conjunction of speech act and unspeaking converges in the ethical domain of responsibility. Bhuvanewari acts in order to give account of actions and inactions, of dying alone hung from a fan and not dying in the commission of an assassination. It is an enunciation that ought to have been heard. But it is refused: the passive voice condemns us all, even before we are apprised of our complicit violence.

Not only is Bhuvanewari's transmission refused by the historical machine, she "was made to unspeak herself." The past-tense passive causative construction of Bhuvanewari's silence performs a double violence on the already dead: zombie self-erasure.²² She is made passively to do something active to an object that no longer exists. More curiously still, the verb "to unspeak," when reflexively indicating Bhuvanewari as subject, suggests a constitutive unbecoming: the speech act that is refused and reversed was previously an act of self-articulation, of self-construction. Made to unspeak herself, Bhuvanewari is made to retract herself from utterance and from view. Made to unspeak herself, she is unmade. The passive voice, however, is an alibi for the activeness of the violence being performed, Spivak alerts us, by a community of women.

The case of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, then, becomes not a failure of representation but a particularly gendered refusal of communication. But what kind of communication is possible with the dead? What aural or textual trace is extracted in the being made to unspeak? It may be instructive in this moment to consider the corrective that Spivak offers to the sentence "The subaltern cannot speak." While this is the phrase that has been repeated and disputed in the countless critiques of the essay in the past three decades, Spivak writes earlier, and reproduces in "History": "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" ("History" 308; "Can" 104). The foreclosure of the subaltern as speaking subject is a result of the inability of the subaltern

gendered as female to be read or heard. There is no signal without receptor. In this account, the speech act must take a form that is appreciable, legible, audible. Indeed, it is intended to be understood, read, heard. Spivak is not calling for hermeneutic transparency—quite the opposite, in fact. The essay is a clarion call against mastery as historiographic method. Nonetheless, Spivak believes insistently that Bhuvanewari made her body speak, and that speech act, though refused by her own relatives, echoes still. She was heard after all: “All speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception” (“History” 309).

We might think of this model of interception as an invitation to be haunted. The seance of historiography requires sitting in the wake of the dead in hopes that they will speak, that they will choose to speak through the living bodies gathered there.²⁵ It is a willingness to be possessed, to be the medium through which the disembodied take form. It is also an act of scholarly identification and, more often than not, incorporation: to hear, even interrupted and through static, that which was once refused. Moreover, to agree to be haunted is to take seriously what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have called the “instantaneous and magical” incorporation of a lost object into the ego (113). The ghost is the familiar who has returned in an unfamiliar nonform and who refuses the obliteration of mortality’s reality-making force. To be haunted is to welcome, however hesitantly, intimacy with spirits on the level of formlessness; it is an intimacy that works in secret, and in protest of the amnesia of biological life. Avery Gordon writes, “If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence, if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8).

Spivak admits in “History” that she “pray[ed] to be haunted” by the ghost of the Rani of Sirmur, in search of whom she delved into the colonial archives of *sati* regulation and whose traces appeared so faintly and insistently that she desired to feel across the reach of time some touch of intimacy with that historical subject (207). This essay has likewise been haunted; the discontinuous, incomplete, fleeting encounter with Pritilata Waddedar’s archival presence carries within it the traces of a prior, unshakable glimpse of another. I have come to know Pritilata Waddedar, in part, by way of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, whose eruptive presence in my first reading

of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” many years ago I have never been able to shake. The finding, and by that I do not mean discovery, of Pritilata Waddedar was a *refinding*, in fragment and static, of Bhuvaneshwari and of an ethical model of reading as haunting. Rather than attempt to locate those missing pieces and decipher the garble, perhaps the work of analysis is the recognition of and insistence on reading through intimacy, the straining toward one another across absence and repetition and failure. The kinship that binds us as scholars of the postcolonial to legacies of resistant women and unreadable fragments and unstable narratives also binds us to a feminist genealogy of hermeneutics, one that exists alongside the promise of incomplete meaning and unsatisfied epistemophilia.

This essay has aimed to follow the lead of a historical subject who, in her writings and with her dead body, so insistently refuses the iniquitous allure of familiar narratives. Immolated, made subject of her own sacrifice, Waddedar aligns herself within a matrilineal history of burning widows and blazing goddesses but jams the gears of the hermeneutic system of legal evidence that depends on a juridical index of desire. She performs the static in the gap between the name—whether “revolutionary” or *sati*—and its physical remains. As we see in Waddedar’s memorials and in Spivak’s ghostly histories, those same evidentiary expectations guide the approaches of historians, those of us looking backward to the past hoping to find proof of consent or desire. We find instead, on Waddedar’s body, a memorial to the politics of illegibility that refuses recognition, which offers only an abiding resistance to being read and mastered.

This essay was written during a postdoctoral fellowship at the Pembroke Center for Research and Teaching on Women. I want to thank in particular Crystal Biruk, Joe Fischel, Hunter Hargraves, Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, Antoine Traisnel, Elizabeth Weed, and Debbie Weinstein for their extensive comments and feedback. A version of this essay was presented at the Feminist Preconference of the Annual Conference on South Asia, where it benefited from the engagement of Anjali Arondekar, Inderpal Grewal, Indrani Chatterjee, and Mrinalini Sinha. I also thank Ania Loomba, Jessica Rosenberg, and Emma Stapley for their contributions to this essay through its many incarnations.

POULOMI SAHA is assistant professor of English at Dickinson College. Her research focuses on postcolonial literature and film, feminist and queer theory, and psychoanalysis. Her current book project, “Imperial Attachments: Gender, Nation, and the Sciences of Subjectivity in Colonial and Postcolonial Bengal,” traces the encounter between imperial discourses of subjectivity and development and anticolonial discourses of resistance and self-determination in Bengal between 1880 and 1971.

Notes

- 1 The name Indian Republican Army was an explicit link to the Irish Republican Army, which significantly influenced revolutionary terrorism in Bengal. The relationship between Irish revolutionary terrorism and Bengali manifests itself in a variety of ways. Members of the Indian Republican Army were inspired by the writings of Dan Breen and Eamon De Valera and began each meeting with a reading of the Easter Uprising Manifesto. The decision to attack the Chittagong Armoury in April, 1930, was intended as an homage to the Easter attacks in Ireland. While the relationship between the Bengali IRA and the Sinn Fein have been examined by Michael Silvestri and by Peter Heehs, there has hitherto been no comprehensive study of the relationship between the two revolutionary terrorist movements that include other provocative points of contact, like the influence of Sister Nivedita, the Irish woman who so influenced Swami Vivekananda, and the construction of a revolutionary literary canon that spanned Bengal and Ireland to include works by Sarat Chandra Bose, Breen, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and De Valera. For more work on the intracolonial relations between India and Ireland, see Cook; Herman; Jeffery; O’Ceallaigh; and Silvestri.
- 2 Please note that throughout this essay, in order to follow the voices of these female revolutionaries and to take seriously the states in which the texts were written, I have avoided the intrusion of the *sic* and followed the spelling and wording of source texts without alteration or interruption.
- 3 There is a wealth of historiographic work on women who participated in the anticolonial insurgency in the 1930s, though it has primarily been biographic in nature and is generally available only in Bengali. Niranjana Ghosh and Tirtha Mandal have both written brief accounts of the lives of Bengali revolutionaries, male and female, and Manini Chatterjee’s recounting of the Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930 is comprised in part of individual accounts of the planning, execution, and aftermath of the raid. For other examples, see Bālā and Sharma; M. Chatterjee, “1930” and *Do*; Ghosh; Gupta; Kaur; Mandal; P. K. Ray; and M. Sharma.
- 4 The appellation *agnikanya* is idiomatically multivalent. Commonly translated as “firebrand daughter,” it also literally refers to the daughter of Lord Agni, god of fire and sacrifice. Interestingly, Lord Agni’s consort, Swaha (the offering) is figured as the daughter of Daksha and sister to the goddess Sati. Called *agnikanya*, Waddedar is thus anointed as the product of divine sacrifice. The trope of women born of fire in the Vedic tradition commonly denotes the dual processes of purification and deification, through *agni-pariksha*—the test of fire. The most visible example is that of Sita, the consort of Lord Ram, who is thrice asked to prove her purity by walking through fire. For a further examination of this trope, see Coomaraswamy.
- 5 While this essay focuses on Waddedar, it remains attuned to the force of the invocation of *sati* as a collective enunciation by other women who participated in revolutionary violence.
- 6 Though I refer to Waddedar predominantly by her surname throughout, I follow Spivak in her use of Bhuvaneshwari’s first name, for the sake of continuity.
- 7 Shiva’s violence is only quelled when Lord Vishnu, with his

sudharshana chakra, destroys Sati's body, slicing it into fifty-one pieces. The weight of her mortal frame quite literally lifted from his shoulders, Shiva ends his divine destruction and sets to the work of forgiveness and repair. Her body is the corporeal engine of his rage: finally destroyed, it no longer holds sway over him. The fifty-one pieces of Sati's body, said to have been strewn across the world, are now sites of worship—Sati Peethas—and historically the site of widow-immolations.

- 8 Alan Bewell delineates the 1817 epidemic as the outbreak of a modern, and indeed colonial, cholera: "Contact with India always had its dangers, but now they were magnified tenfold. [. . .] Spread along the main transportation and commercial arteries of the nineteenth century—by river, sea, road, and later by railway—cholera mapped the many lines of communication between Britain and its colonial possessions. Its spread thus demarcated the reach of empire, demonstrating that there were no longer any boundaries" (244).
- 9 In *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee identifies the ways in which nationalists sought to resolve "the women's question" in Bengal by identifying domestic space as an ideological battleground upon which to wage their anticolonial struggle. He writes that, to the nationalist, "[T]he world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman is its representation" (120). In other
- words, the inner feminine domain harbors all that is untainted by the forces of colonization and is therefore a particularly efficacious space in which to converge an anticolonial discourse intended to be inaccessible and nominally incomprehensible to colonial forces. Chatterjee's argument that Bengali nationalism successfully redirected the question of women's rights and advancement onto a patriarchal discourse of protecting the "essence" of culture identifies the double move of isolating the domestic space and publicizing it as representative of all Bengal. The consecration of the domestic space in Bengali nationalist discourse removed it from the purview of colonial politics, converging on it a patriarchal form that reified traditional notions of domesticity.
- 10 This is an uncanny doubling within Lord Macaulay's two most influential tracts, the 1838 Indian Penal Code and the 1835 "Minute on Indian Education." In the "Minute on Education," Macaulay sketches an ideal colonial subject from whose image an entire class would be made flesh, "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population" (359). Gauri Viswanathan has persuasively marked the ways in which the Macaulayan program of Anglicization did not deviate from the Orientalist pedagogical mode thus far promoted by the colonial administration, as both relied upon an influential native population through whom

the effects of education might trickle down to the larger population, the “Filtration Theory.” Though the penal code was designed to operate through far less dispersed means than the educational policy, those “fit vehicles” of Macaulay’s pedagogical mission were conditioned, or disciplined, into the emergent jurisprudential discourse. Education and law were thus of a piece in their efforts to produce, more by hook than crook, disciples of the new empire.

- 11 The 1857 Mutiny, also called the Sepoy Mutiny, began as a soldier rebellion in Meerut and spread to other military and civilian uprisings. Spurred by that initial uprising by members of the Bengal Presidency Army, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor of India, declared himself emperor of all India and marshaled anticolonial forces. Most famously, perhaps, the uprising in Jhansi, led by Rani Lakshmi Bai, attempted to liberate the city of Gwalior. The Rani, to whom I will return below, was killed during the battle and has since become an icon of female militancy on the subcontinent. The rebellion, quashed by July 1858—mostly due to a lack of central organization and large geographic regions untouched by the violence—saw the end of the British East India Company’s rule in India. The Government of India Act of 1858 dissolved the company and transferred its powers to the Crown. One result thereof was the solidification of a penal code in the 1858 Act.
- 12 Prior to the consolidation of governance under the British Crown in 1858, a cordon sanitaire had been erected around matters of religious or familial practice. In his 1722 *Plan for the Administration of Justice*, Governor Warren Hastings decreed that “in all suits regarding inheritance, marriage, caste and other religious usages or institutions, the laws of the Koran with respect to the Mohamedans and those of the Shaster with respect to the Gentoos shall invariably be adhered to” (qtd. in Israel 598). It is in deference to this earlier noninterventionist policy that the statute of voluntary culpable homicide by consent comes to be so periphrastically figured. More than forbidding a single practice, the statute does the synecdochal work of representing a new form of governmentality. *Sati* has to be the shibboleth, unuttered but illustrated.
- 13 The illustration further intends to regularize across all regions of India the prohibition against *sati* that is first codified in the Bengal presidency by the 1829 regulation and in other presidencies thereafter. The purpose of the newly drafted penal code, after all, was to provide a common law across presidencies to consolidate the legislative and punitive force of the British government in India and to commission the force of law into a single administrative body.
- 14 Crimes that fall under the mitigated class of offenses do so, according to Macaulay, for two reasons. First, they are motivated by affects “generally far more respectable” than those that incite the crime of murder (“Introductory” 423). The moral economy evoked here suggests a normative baseline for what constitutes “respectable” in terms of motives. Indeed, the normative force of law depends intimately upon the shared deontic experience of affect and motivation: the logic of respectability in the law is universalizing and intended to be objective. Macaulay goes on to offer an illustration of that respectability of motive in the “high-born native of India who stabs the females of his family at their own entreaty in

- order to save them from the licentiousness of a band of marauders” (423). He suggests that they would, anywhere but in “Christian societies,” not be culpable, and even in those societies, not be regarded by the public as “assassins.” The legalistic condition of respectability depends on a translatability of intent and value; the respectable, like consent, must be appreciable.
- 15 The work of Lata Mani and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan is here particularly useful as they represent two dominant and compelling poles of postcolonial scholarship on *sati*. Mani argues in *Contentious Traditions* that the debate around *sati* depended on an ideological fixing of the widow as an object of intervention and never as a subject in action. Ranjan’s project in *Real and Imagined Women* is a phenomenological inquiry into the question of pain, the widow as woman on fire. This essay is deeply indebted to these feminist inquiries into the discursive production of subjectivity within the debate around *sati*. For more on *sati*, see also Datta; Fisch, “Dying” and “Sati”; Gilmartin; Laxshmi; Mani, “Production”; Nandy; A. K. Ray; Sangari and Vaid; and A. Sharma.
- 16 The British overseers of Calcutta University did not confer her degree upon her at the time because she was wanted by authorities. She and Bina Das were both posthumously awarded their degrees by the university in 2012.
- 17 While Pritilata Waddedar’s diary was destroyed by colonial authorities following the trial, the portions of it introduced at trial were, ironically, preserved in the court records, and subsequently reprinted in both the *Chittagong Uprising Golden Jubilee Souvenir* and M. Sharma’s *The Easter Rebellion in India: The Chittagong Uprising*.
- 18 Alison Winter, in *Mesmerized: Powers of the Mind in Victorian Britain*, offers a useful account of colonial India as a laboratory for mesmerist experiments and of its prevalence as social referent in this period.
- 19 Durga, along with Sati, Uma, Gauri, and Parvati, is figured in a variety of texts and Vedic traditions as the consort of Shiva. The relationship between her and the others is a synchronic compression made possible by the logic of reincarnation and the range of goddess-worship traditions that came, during British rule, to be collated under Hinduism as a singular religion. Unlike the others, whose primarily discursive function is the representation of proper wifeliness, Durga is the blazing and fearsome mother goddess, compelled to Earth by Shiva to fight the demon who had thus far proved undefeatable. She is at once incarnation of those other consorts and exalted above all others. She and the goddess Kali are figured as the most powerful manifestations of Shakti, a primordial cosmic feminine energy.
- 20 Though the prosecution offered several witnesses to support their case that Sen was involved in the terrorist activities in Chittagong, their primary argument emerged through the juxtaposition of Sen’s “Vijaya” and the pamphlet “Long Live Revolution” found on Waddedar’s body at the time of her death. The two texts, when read together by the prosecution, paint a causal relationship “of close association” in which shared intimacies equate projected guilt. This is not, of course, to claim that Sen was not complicit in the attacks; he indeed planned and helped to execute them. It is important to

acknowledge, however, the ways in which the prosecution's argument does not ascribe to Sen the control over and investment in the Pahartali raid and others that he imagines in his essay. Sen, in other words, evinces a stronger investment in his own material causality—and the corresponding image of himself as a man of action—than do his prosecutors.

- 21 Police Commissioner Charles Tegart described the initial confusion over Pritilata's body in his unpublished autobiography, which is available at the British Library, in the Asia, Africa, Pacific Collections Private Papers.
- 22 We might here think of Disney's 1989 animated feature, *The Little Mermaid*, in which mermaid Ariel gives up her voice in exchange for human legs. Her voice is figured as organ-like, extractable and transplantable. In the scene, Ariel sings the scales, the light of her voice glowing through her translucent skin, as Ursula the witch, hypersexualized and phallusized with tentacles, wildly cackles, "Keep singing!" as she conjures phantom hands to reach into Ariel's

throat to extract the glowing orb. The phantasmatically solidified sound is then transplanted into the grotesquely vulvic shell around Ursula's neck. Ariel is made, if not to unspeak herself, to unsing herself, a melodic castration into humanness. The limbs she is offered in recompense are, we are to understand, an utterly inadequate prosthesis, bringing her within proximity of her object of desire, the hapless and administratively befuddled Prince Eric, but preventing her from being human enough. It is her speechlessness that allures him, for who does not want a silent supplicant as paramour, but it is her voice, uncannily reembodyed by Ursula in the guise of a human woman, that he believes himself in love with. There, even, it is her voice in song—only the melodic simulacrum of what she sacrificed. Ariel's voice is both the condition of her human possibility and its betrayal.

- 23 I am following here, to a degree, Derrida's notion of hauntology from *Specters of Marx* in taking seriously the spectral presence of that which history marks as its debris and erases.

Works Cited

- Abraham, Nicolas, and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994.
- "Arrest of Woman in Male Attire." *Times of India* 23 June 1932. Proquest. (1861–Current).
- Bālā, Ushā, and Anshu Sharma. *Indian Women Freedom Fighters, 1857–1947*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1986.
- Bentinck, William Lord. "Preamble to 1829 Bengal Regulation of Sati." *The Bengal Code: Bengal Regulations, Local Acts of the Governor General in Council and the Regulations Made under 33 Victoria, Cap. 3, in Force in Bengal*. Ed. Charles Herman Oertel and Frederic George Wigley. India. Legislative Dept. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Print, 1889. 267–69.
- Bewell, Alan. *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003.
- Bose, Purnima. *Organizing Empire: Individualism, Collective Agency, and India*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.
- Butler, Judith. *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.

- Chatterjee, Manini. *Do and Die: The Chittagong Uprising, 1930–34*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1999.
- . “1930: Turning Point in the Participation of Women in the Freedom Struggle.” *Social Scientist* 29.7/8 (2001): 39–47.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995.
- Chittagong Uprising Golden Jubilee: 18 April 1980–18 April 1981*. Calcutta: Chittagong Uprising Golden Jubilee Committee, 1981.
- Cook, S. B. *Imperial Affinities: Nineteenth-Century Analogies and Exchanges between India and Ireland*. New Delhi: Sage, 1995.
- Coomaraswamy, Ananda. “Self-Sacrifice.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6.3/4 (Feb. 1942): 358–98.
- Das, Bina. “Statement before the Special Tribunal of the Calcutta High Court.” *Subhas Chandra Bose*. <http://www.subhaschandrabose.org/binadas.php> (accessed 22 Jan. 2008).
- Datta, V. N. *Sati: A Historical, Social, and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow Burning*. Riverdale: Riverdale, 1988.
- de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- . “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Psychology, 1983. 187–228.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Deconstruction and the Other: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida.” *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida*. Ed. Richard Kearney. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984. 159–56.
- . *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- De Valera, Eamon. *India and Ireland*. New York: Friends of Freedom for India, 1920.
- Dutt, Kalpana Joshi. *Chittagong Armoury Raiders’ Reminiscences*. Delhi: People’s Press, 1979.
- Fisch, Jörg. “Dying for the Dead: Sati in Universal Context.” *Journal of World History* 16.3 (2005): 293–325.
- . “Sati and the Task of the Historian.” *Journal of World History* 18.3 (2007): 361–68.
- Ghosh, Niranjan. *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement in Bengal, 1919–1947: Midnapore, Bankura, and Purulia District*. Midnapore: Tamralipta Prakashani, 1988.
- Gilmartin, Sophie. “The Sati, the Bride, and the Widow: Sacrificial Woman in the Nineteenth Century.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 25.1 (1997): 141–58.
- “Girl, Believed to Be Mesmerised.” *Times of India* 11 Nov. 1933. Proquest. (1861–Current).
- Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.

- Gupta, Amit Kumar. "Defying Death: Nationalist Revolutionism in India, 1897–1938." *Social Scientist* 25.9/10 (1997): 3–27.
- Harlan, Lindsey. *Religion and Rajput Women: The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.
- Heehs, Peter. "Foreign Influences on Bengali Revolutionary Terrorism, 1902–1908." *Modern Asian Studies* 28.03 (1994): 533–56.
- Herman, Jeanette. *Empire's Bodies: Images of Suffering in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century India and Ireland*. New York: Macmillan, 2004.
- . "Men and Women of Feeling: Conventions of Sensibility and Sentimentality in the Sati Debate and in Mainwaring's *The Suttee*." *Comparative Literature Studies* 42.2 (2005): 223–63.
- "High Court Judgment—Surya Sen Case. Special Bench: Pankridge, Ameer Ali and M. G. Ghose, J. J. Emperor v. Surjya Kumar Sen and Other-Accused-Appellents." M. Sharma 438–57.
- Israel, Jonathan. *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750–1790*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.
- Jeffery, Keith. *An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire*. New York: Manchester UP, 1996.
- Kaur, Manmohan. *Women in India's Freedom Struggle*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1985.
- Laxshmi, A. "The Liminal Body: The Language of Pain and Symbolism around Sati." *Feminist Review* 74.1 (2003): 81–97.
- The Little Mermaid*. Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Home Video, 1989.
- Loomba, Ania. "Dead Women Tell No Tales: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency, and Tradition in Colonial and Post-colonial Writings on Widow Immolation in India." *History Workshop* 36 (Autumn 1993): 209–27.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. "Introductory Report upon the Indian Penal Code." *Miscellanies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1901. 415–29.
- . "Minute on Indian Education." *Speeches by Lord Macaulay: With His Minute on Indian Education*. Ed. G. M. Young. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979. 356–57.
- Mandal, Tirtha. *The Women Revolutionaries of Bengal, 1905–1939*. New Delhi: Minerva, 1991.
- Mani, Lata. *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998.
- . "Production of an Official Discourse on 'Sati' in Early Nineteenth-Century Bengal." *Economic and Political Weekly* 21.17 (26 Apr. 1986): WS32–40.
- Mukherjee, Ishanee. "Scaling the Barrier: Women, Revolution, and Abscondence in Late Colonial Bengal." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 6.61 (1999): 61–78.
- Nandy, Ashis. "Nationalism, Genuine and Spurious: Mourning Two Early Post-nationalist Strains." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2006): 3500–504.
- O'Ceallaigh, Sean. *India and Ireland*. New York: Friends of Freedom for India, 1924.

- Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. "Death and the Subaltern." *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Ed. Rosalind Morris. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. 117–38.
- . *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism*. New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004.
- Ray, Ajit Kumar. *Widows Are Not for Burning: Actions and Attitudes of the Christian Missionaries, the Native Hindus, and Lord William Bentinck*. Calcutta: ABC, 1985.
- Ray, P. K. *Down Memory Lane: Reminiscences of a Bengali Revolutionary*. New Delhi: Gian, 1990.
- Sangari, Kumkum, and S. Vaid. "Sati in Modern India: A Report." *Economic and Political Weekly* 16.31 (1988): 1284–88.
- Sen, Surya. "Vijaya." M. Sharma 268–73.
- Sharma, Arvind, ed. *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays*. New Delhi: Motilal, 1988.
- Sharma, Mallikarjuna, ed. *The Easter Rebellion in India: The Chittagong Uprising*. Calcutta: Marxist Study Forum, 1963.
- Silvestri, Michael. *Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire, and Memory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- . "'The Sinn Fein of India': Irish Nationalism and the Policing of Revolutionary Terrorism in Bengal." *Journal of British Studies* 39.4 (2000): 454–86.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. 66–111.
- . "History." *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999. 198–311.
- Statute 298. Voluntary Culpable Homicide by Consent. Indian Penal Code. 1858.
- Tegart, Charles Augustus. "Charles Tegart of the Indian Police." N.d. ms. British Library, Asia, Africa, Pacific Collections. Private Papers. Mss Eur C235 1881–1946.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- Waddedar, Pritilata. "An Appeal to Women." M. Chatterjee 122.
- . "Assault on the European Club." M. Sharma 263–64.
- . "Long Live Revolution." M. Sharma 266.
- Winter, Alison. *Mesmerized: Powers of the Mind in Victorian Britain*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.