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Virginia Lynn Butler
College of William and Mary

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**Black Brides: Examining the Eastern Threat to
Victorian Womanhood in Fiction**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

By:

Virginia Lynn Butler

Accepted for: _____

Nancy Gray, Committee Chair

Suzanne Raitt

Kathrin Levitan

Deborah Morse, Thesis Director

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15 April, 2011

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Black Brides – Examining the Eastern threat to Victorian Womanhood in
Fiction

‘The *chuppatties*¹ we hear are being sent round up-country; but that is in league also with the Brahmins in Calcutta—especially the priests at Kali’s shrine—over *suttee* and widow re-marriage and all that. However, all I know is that both Hindoos and Mohammedans in my classes are in a blue funk about the cartridges, and swear even their wives won’t live with them if they touch them.’
‘The common grievance,’ said Jim Douglas, in the silence that ensued. ‘It alters the whole aspect of affairs.’ (Steel 123)

The Indian Mutiny of 1857 stands as one of the most violent chapters in England’s history with India. What began as a series of ideological conflicts between East and West eventually led to an uprising marked on both sides by “a ferocity for which even the ordinary depravity of human nature cannot account” (Grant and Knollys 1). The Mutiny called into question English assumptions about the complacency of the Indian people, who were widely assumed to be faithful to their British masters; however, the real threat of the insurrection was not to these preconceived notions of Indian docility, but to the very system of English supremacy. Though the fires of rebellion were eventually quenched through decisive British force, “large, well trained...but poorly led” (Herbert 1) Indian rebels successfully “[shook] the British power in India to its foundation” (Grant and Knollys 334).

The rebellion of 1857 was heralded by many minor outbreaks and major disagreements between the Indians and their English sovereigns. Though the immediate cause of the Mutiny is widely thought to have been the incident of the greased cartridges,

¹ Signals that the Mutiny was about to begin and the rebels should prepare.

alluded to in the above excerpt from Flora Annie Steel's novel, *On the Face of the Waters*, in reality the upset caused by the cartridges was "merely the puff of wind which fanned the smouldering mass of embers—accumulating for ages—into a flame."² In truth, the first signs of uprising flared decades earlier with England's slow but systematic suppression of Indian religious practices. As Lata Mani argues, "nineteenth-century British India was marked by a series of debates on reforming the status of women. The first, and most sensational, public debate was concerned with the outlawing of sati" (107). With the abolishment of sati in 1829, the British fired the first volley at Indian ideological practices. For years, sati – the ritual self-immolation of Hindu widows – was the battleground upon which the cultural war between the British and the Indians was waged. For Indians, denial of sati was far less humane than the practice itself. A woman who commits sati becomes enshrined within the community and is posthumously worshipped as a goddess. Women who are denied the honor of sati, however, are seen as outcasts and renounced by both friend and family. Given the insurmountable cultural divide surrounding the issue, the image of the burning widow became "symbolic of India's resistance to England's imperial control," (Fiske 12). Widow burning is a highly gendered imperial issue: the sati figure is an affront to the Englishman's claim to

² In February of 1857, the Enfield rifle was introduced to the Bengal Army. The rifles' cartridges were greased with pig and cow fat, animals sacred to the Muslims and Hindus, respectively. Use of these rifles required the soldiers to bite the ends of the cartridges, an act that was considered a form of contamination to soldiers of both faiths. The rifles, and the British who forced their use, were seen as an assault on the Indian faith. (Grant and Knollys 3)

ownership of the Indian woman's body. Between 1815 and 1826, Indian widows burned themselves not only out of observance to their faith, but in protest to British anti-sati legislation. This resistance to British hegemony is explored in an 1857 article in *Household Words*, entitled "Lutfullah Kahn." In this article, before mounting her pyre, a young Hindu widow "wrapped her finger in oiled rags, and setting it on fire so that it burned like a candle, triumphantly exhibited it to the Europeans, who having no authority, as at present, to interfere by force, reluctantly withdrew" (Townsend 494-5). Even in the face of such blatant acts of defiance by Hindu widows, England continued to push for anti-sati legislation arguing the benevolence of such statutes.

The English seized upon sati as a chance to save the natives from themselves – a mission used, in part, to legitimize the English presence in India. As Gayatri Spivak critiques in her examination of England's use of sati, "Imperialism's image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind" (299). The burning Hindu woman allows the British man to step into the role of savior and herald a "Victorian revival of chivalry" (Chakravarty 68). Sati allowed the English to mask their economic interests in India with a veneer of religious obligation and indignation: "It is indeed unaccountable how these Brahmins, who are so scrupulous and attach so much importance to the life of the most insignificant insect, and whose feelings are excited to pity and indignation at the very sight of a cow being slaughtered, can, with such savage cold-bloodedness and wicked satisfaction, look upon so many weak and innocent human beings" (Dubois 367). The anti-Hindu legislation of the time speaks to this image of the "missionary-utilitarian knight" triumphing over the "idolatrous Hindu" – an image that England was trying desperately

to propagate (Chakravarty 68). Governor-General William Bentinck's famous declaration of 1829 speaks to this idea of England's obligation "not only to rescue widowed Indian women but to liberate the Hindu population from its mistaken beliefs" (Fiske 3):

The practice of Sati or of burning or of burying alive the widows of Hindus, is revolting to the feelings of human nature. . . . 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. (Anand 16)

While British rule of India was categorized by religious intolerance, nothing captured the British imagination more than the act of sati. The figure of the self-immolating widow became a fixture in the collective Victorian consciousness, as reflected by the fiction of the time. Though the British were collectively horrified by sati, its frequent appearance in the fiction of the nineteenth century speaks to the bizarre titillation that British readers seemed to find in the image of the woman set ablaze. This perverse, voyeuristic enjoyment that British audiences felt at the sight of the burning Indian woman is demonstrated in Henry Bushby's *Widow-Burning: A Narrative* (1855) in which he describes an eager crowd of onlookers to the event: "Something, however, in the excitement of their voices and gestures, boded the approach of a spectacle more thrilling than mere pomp could render even a royal funeral" (5). Not only are the onlookers described as waiting with "excitement" for the burning of the Indian widow, but the act itself is viewed as a "thrilling spectacle" worthy of a Western audience.

The term "sati" is taken from the Hindu goddess of marital felicity and fidelity, Sati (also known as Dakshayani). According to Hindu mythology, the goddess Sati immolated herself because she was unable to bear the humiliation that her father, Daksha,

heaped upon her living husband, the god Shiva. Daksha was furious with his daughter for forsaking the luxuries of the world to marry the ascetic Shiva and, as a result, questioned his daughter's bridegroom. The realization that Shiva was only suffering this attack on his honor because he had decided to marry Sita pushed her to self-immolate.

While Indian culture emphasizes the noble and even divine origins of sati, the English imperialists seized upon the practice of sati as evidence of the savagery of the backwards East and proof of the necessity of the British reformatory presence in India. Though several attempts were made by British officers in the 18th century to ban or at least limit the practice, the British government did not join in on the crusade until 1789 when the first formal ban was imposed upon the city of Calcutta. Nevertheless, the practice of sati persisted in surrounding areas. Towards the end of the century, the first Christian-driven campaigns to end sati (led by William Carey and William Wilberforce,³ among others) were formed, though they experienced limited success in passing legislation. Nevertheless, these coalitions put pressure on the British East India Company to intervene against widow-immolation, which was formally banned from the Bengal Presidency lands in 1829 by then governor, Lord William Bentinck. Nevertheless, sati was permitted in certain circumstances into the 20th century and still occurs today.⁴

³ Wilberforce was a great abolitionist who led the fight against the English slave trade—and won, after thirty years of struggle, in 1808.

⁴ Notably, sati was still permitted by royal families during the nineteenth century. The most recent incident occurred in October of 2008 when a 75-year old woman committed sati by immolating herself on her 80-year-old husband's funeral pyre at Checher in the Kasdol block of Chhattisgarh's Rajpur district (as reported by *The Times of India*).

The issue of sati was inherently culturally contentious, enabling the English to exploit the practice as evidence that the Indians were barbarous and in need of civilizing. The criminalization of sati was one of many legislative attacks the English made against the Indians. In an effort to weaken dynastic control of the country, the English dissolved Indian inheritance rights. Prior to the reform period (beginning in 1828), Indians were prohibited from inheriting property. After the reform, the right to inheritance was reinstated for Indian converts to Christianity (Herbert 30). However, English control over Indian inheritance extended beyond religious lines. In 1849 the Doctrine of Lapse, which decreed, “on all occasions, where heirs natural shall fail, the territory should be made lapse, and adoption should not be permitted,” nullified the right of adopted heirs to inherit (Chakravarty, 60). The issue of Hindu inheritance reached a boiling point in 1855 when the English applied the Doctrine of Lapse to royal houses. The government refused to allow the Nana Sahib Dhondu Pant of Bithoor – the adoptive successor of Baji Rao – to inherit his father’s lands and title. This gross abuse of power on behalf of the British became a rallying point for the Sepoys, eventually contributing to the outbreak of the Mutiny. Through a series of legislative actions including “the criminalization of *sati*... the encouragement of widow remarriage, the education of women, [and] the law allowing Christian converts to inherit,” the English took aim and fired upon the religious-inflected Hindu way of life (68-9).

While the English doggedly maintained that their presence in India was both necessary and beneficial to the unsophisticated Indians, the events of the Mutiny called into question the legitimacy of the so-called civilizing mission. While atrocities were doubtlessly committed on both sides, Indian cruelty was returned in kind through British

retaliation. Such is the case with the Well of Cawnpore, the location of perhaps the most chilling demonstration of brutality during the Mutiny, in which the rebel commander, Nana Sahib – the arch-villain of the Mutiny to the British mind – recruited a small party of thugs (his troops refused to carry out the vicious task) to “hack to pieces with swords and axes more than two hundred British women and children prisoners” (Herbert 4). The bodies were then stuffed into the well and those that couldn’t fit were tossed into the Ganges. In response, British troops designed an extra punishment for rebels implicated in the massacre. “Before being taken out to the gallows, each was forced to clean up with his own hands or to lick up a small square of dried blood from the courtyard pavement where the prisoners had been slaughtered—an appalling pollution for a high-caste Hindu, as most of the Sepoys were” (4). In this way, the British sent the rebels to their deaths unclean, and consequently unable to enter paradise. The swiftness and ferocity of British retribution marked the Mutiny as one of the darkest chapters in British imperial history. Just as the women and children of Britain were not spared from slaughter by Sepoy hands, the British similarly targeted innocent Indians. “[The British] inflicted on their defeated foe, and often on innocent civilians, the very horror that had been their lot, and more” (Cawasjee 26). As Shamsul Islam describes in his *Chronicles of the Raj* (1979),

While rebel sepoy were blown to death from the mouth of the cannons, civilians were hanged on a mass scale. There was hardly a tree without a corpse hanging on its branches; volunteer hanging parties went out into the districts, and amateur executioners found delight in finishing the Indians off ‘in an artistic manner.’

The British feelings of hatred and injustice fueled their lust for vengeance, allowing savagery such as this to be widely regarded as justified. It was a similar spirit of vicious retribution that led General Dyer to fire on an unarmed crowd at Jallianwala Bagh in

1919. Of the 5000 Indians present, some 1500 were killed or wounded (Covasjee 27). British rule had to be restored, and to the British who so recently watched their countrywomen killed by Indian hands, there seemed no better way to quell the rebellion and cow potential rebels.

Long after the last blow had been dealt against the Sepoys, the cry for revenge still echoed throughout the British presses. Though the battles had ended, the relationship between the British and the Indians continued to deteriorate as stories of Indian atrocities were put into circulation. The most common of these tales of barbarism was that of the rape of European women by mutineers. While these rape narratives were largely unfounded, the image of the White woman violated by the native came to haunt the minds of the British, as reflected in the fiction of the time. Writers of Mutiny fiction exploited the body of the ruined Englishwoman, churning out novel after novel centered on the rape—or near rape—of white women by Indians (27).

While British views on India were often stained by jingoism and bigotry, a few sympathetic English voices emerged during the period. Such is the case with Philip Meadows Taylor and Flora Annie Steel, two novelists of the time who dealt primarily with Anglo-Indian relations and the Mutiny in particular. While many of the authors of Mutiny fiction never set foot on Indian soil, Taylor and Steel cultivated deep roots both in England and in India, both having lived in the East for decades. Taylor (1808-76) was sent to India at the age of fifteen to work in the house of a Bombay merchant. In 1824, he took a commission in the Nizam's forces in Hyderabad. He would eventually take an administrator position there in 1841, serving twenty years without furlough. By the time

he returned to England, due to health problems, in 1860, Taylor had spent more of his life in India than in his home country (Sutherland 627).

Steel (née Webster, 1847-1929) married Henry William Steel, who was at the time on leave from the Indian Civil Service, when she was eighteen. The couple left England to settle in Punjab. The expected pattern of Steel's married life was interrupted when, in 1870, her first child was aborted to save the mother's life. Although a daughter was born soon after, Steel's maternal interests were thereafter directed in large part to the native Indians. She refused to regard them as heathens, and devoted herself particularly to the well-being and education of native women, training herself as a lay medical practitioner. As a *burra mem*, or senior lady in the Indian Civil Service, she founded a school for native girls at the large station of Kasur in 1884 and as an inspector worked for the improvement of education generally in the subcontinent. At the end of her stay in India, she estimated that no fewer than 20,000 Indian girls had passed through her care (Sutherland 608-9).

Taylor's and Steel's intimate knowledge of Indian culture gives their novels both authority and complexity. This experience with India keeps Taylor and Steel from grounding their narratives in fantasy and overly exoticizing the East. As Nancy Paxton states, "Mutiny novels written by British men and women who lived in India, in contrast to novels written by writers in the metropolis, reflected more of the tension of the heat of life... though Anglo-Indian novels about the Mutiny bear the traces of metropolitan colonial discourse, they were potentially open to a much wider variety of voices and often contest the language, ideologies, and assumptions of British Orientalist constructions of India" (9). Though this first-hand experience with India helped to pare

their novels of the ignorance that fueled much of the literary cultural bias indicative of the genre, the two novels I examine, Taylor's *Seeta* and Steel's *On the Face of the Waters*, are still widely overlooked within the genre of Mutiny fiction. Unlike their classically English contemporaries, Taylor and Steel shied away from centering their texts on the rape of Englishwomen in favor of penning more sympathetic, heteroglossic texts that didn't discount native practices – such as disgust for the greased cartridges or advocating the practice of sati – as mere native superstition; Taylor and Steel's experience in India allowed them to see such acts as a legitimate religious observance.

Both the cultural significance and controversy surrounding sati color how the practice is depicted in Victorian fiction. This idea is perhaps best seen in Philip Meadows Taylor's novel, *Seeta* (1872). Even in simply naming his titular heroine, Taylor is invoking the image of the immolated woman and alluding to the heroine of the great Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, who bears the same name. In the traditional Indian tale, Seeta (also known as Sati depending on the translation), the wife of Rama, is considered the pinnacle of what a wife and mother should strive to embody. After the evil Ravana abducts Seeta, Rama asks her to undergo a literal trial by fire to prove that she did not sexually betray him while she was held captive; if she emerges from the flames unscathed, her honor will not be questioned. Seeta plunges herself into the sacrificial fire without hesitation and emerges unscathed. As Sangeeta Ray notes in her text, *En-Gendering India*, the image of the beautiful Seeta emerging from the flames in the *Ramayana* contrasts the gruesome spectacle of the charred widow being burned to keep her honor in nineteenth century India (69). With this juxtaposition in mind, "sati" can refer alternatively to both the action of immolation or to Sati the goddess. Through

the naming of his own heroine, Taylor places his Seeta in the liminal space between these two interpretations—Seeta and sati—of what it means to be a proper Hindu woman.

Like her namesake, the Seeta of Taylor's novel faces the threat of being morally contaminated through her sexuality. In this text, Seeta becomes a widow after her husband is killed during a raid organized by the Brahmin dacoit⁵ Azrael Pandé (this same Pandé reemerges later in the novel as one of the chief instigators of the Mutiny). Seeta and her family come to epitomize the loyal Indian subjects who retain, even while the Mutiny rages around them, "a strong, deep-lying attachment to English rule, to English faith and honour, and to that ample protection of property to the meanest as well as to the richest, which a powerful English government had afforded (315). This allegiance to English traditions keeps Seeta from committing sati at the news of her husband's death. Instead, Seeta lives to uphold the principles of her English rulers by testifying against Pandé for the local magistrate, Cyril Brandon, at the British court. This refusal to take up the role of the traditional Hindu wife by performing the "duties and ceremonies of a widow in full—[having] her beautiful hair shorn off, and break[ing] the ornaments on the place where [her husband's] body had been burned"—serves to signal Seeta's departure from the typical Indian woman (49). Even in the very tint of her skin tone, Seeta is markedly un-Indian – a fact that captures the attention of the magistrate: "For a native woman, Cyril Brandon had never seen any one so fair or of so tender a tone of color. Such he remembered, were many of the lovely women of Titian's pictures" (61). The fairness of Seeta's skin allows both Brandon and the reader to disassociate the Indian woman from the rest of her race and reinscribe her within the more comfortable realm of

⁵ A member of a band of armed robbers in India or Myanmar (Burma).

Englishness and the general European tradition alluded to by the reference to Titian, one of Europe's most celebrated painters. Her "concrete otherness," like the color of her skin, becomes diluted through a lens of whiteness (Ray 71).

Seeta is not alone in her interracial border crossing. Brandon's love for India and its people sets him apart from the many British men inhabiting the country: "India, and its history and people, had always fascinated him: and he studied the great characters who had gained fame there, and burned to emulate them" (67). During the time he spends in the country, Brandon ingratiates himself with the native Indians to the point that "many a dame, humble as she might be, repeated his name with that of her household gods each night as she lighted the lamp before the shrine of her faith" (69). This combination of Brandon's vicarious Hinduism through the "dames" that worship on his behalf and his own desire to "burn to emulate" the people of India indicates an undeniable aspect of the Indian. The suggestion that Brandon wishes to burn like a true Indian suggests a kind of cross-gendered sati. While Seeta casts aside her traditional feminine role within the Indian community, Brandon departs from his position as a masculine Englishman in a wistful desire to adopt the role of a feminized Indian. In this way, both Seeta and Brandon share a kind of gendered and cultural hybridity. Their ethnically compromised interiorities, coupled with Seeta's outwardly white appearance, allows Brandon and Seeta to exist in a liminal space between their disparate cultures. This interstitial space provides the possibility for their developing interracial relationship. Conveniently, Seeta's child from her first marriage dies, leaving the option open for a relationship with Brandon. A living, native child would compromise Seeta's apparent whiteness and undermine Brandon's ability to see her as one of the "lovely women of Titian's pictures."

Unshackled by the bonds of Indian motherhood, Seeta is allowed to pursue and realize a marriage with the British Brandon.

Seeta's unflinching devotion to her new husband allows her to realize the role of sati without the need for self-immolation. In her second marriage, Seeta sees herself as "a faithful wife till she [dies]" (132). Similarly, her aunt sees the potential of this marriage to elevate her niece to "the very Queen of all provinces" (132). This combination of elevation and unflinching loyalty through marriage allows Seeta to realize her potential as sati, not as the burned widow but as the goddess. As John Hawley argues, "Strictly speaking Sati [the goddess] does not commit sati—at least not in any major version of her myth. True, she does sacrifice herself for the sake of her husband Shiva...[and] the Sati legend provides a general paradigm for a woman's boundless devotion to her husband" (14). Similarly, Brandon undergoes a transformation through his union to Seeta – his social elevation to godlike local hero and his gracious acceptance of "a red bridal dress and a turban" make him a legitimate Hindu husband for his Indian bride. Just as Seeta's love and devotion transform her into a Sati figure, Brandon's love for his Indian bride and the metamorphosis he experiences as a result of such affections mark him as her rightful Shiva-like spouse.

Though a Brahmin priest sanctions their marriage, the growing religious tensions between the newlyweds, coupled with the manipulations and machinations of Ram Das, a rejected suitor, slowly lead to Seeta being ostracized by the Hindu community. Her decision to inhabit a Christian household results in a perceived contamination of her Indianness. However, since a Brahmin priest has blessed her union, Seeta's only option of reasserting herself as an Indian would be to renounce her role as a loyal Hindu wife.

This inescapable contradiction makes Seeta the staging ground on which the battle for England to establish control over the Indian is negotiated.

Though Seeta is able to enter into a marriage with an Englishman, she is never fully adopted into the white British sphere. Despite her countless virtues, her education, her love and admiration for the British, and the relative fairness of her skin, Seeta is ill received by Brandon's friends and family and forever viewed as an outcast encroaching upon the realm of Englishness. Both legally and spiritually, Seeta can only ever be Brandon's wife in India; their marriage would never be able to survive transplantation onto British soil. Brandon's own brother, Lord Hylton, voices this fact in a letter after hearing the news of the union to a native: "She could *never* take her place as your wife here [in England], and the idea of recognizing such a person as Seeta, as a member of our old family, is, as you must see yourself on reflection, perfectly absurd and impossible" (238). Though their marriage rites speak to a certain amount of enlightened thinking on Brandon's part, because they had a Hindu ceremony, their marriage will not be legally recognized in England.⁶ As such, the validity of their marriage is inherently undermined. Unfortunately, the legal hurdles are not the only obstacles barring Brandon and Seeta from having a fulfilling and lasting marriage. Seeta's education, willingness to learn English customs, and whiteness of skin mark her as the ideal Hindu woman; however, she will never be able to fully cleanse herself of her inherent Indianness. Consequently,

⁶ At the time, the Hindus viewed marriage exclusively a sacrament and not a contract. Therefore, their marriage is not legally binding and would have no weight should they return to Britain. Marriage did not have legal implications in India until the codification of the Hindu Marriage Act in 1955.

Seeta will never be the rightful wife of Brandon. Another woman of the text, Grace Mostyn, unwittingly and effortlessly claims that title. Grace “was very fair, and the pure English colour was as fresh as ever; that gentle mingling of the most delicate carnations with white which no woman’s complexions but those of England can boast of” (170).

Seeta may possess relatively milky skin for her race, but she will always pale in comparison in the face of her English competition. This sad reality is given voice when Philip Mostyn, an admittedly tolerant Englishman who sees value in intermarriage between the English and the Indians, observes Brandon and Grace together:

But Cyril, poor fellow, will get tired of the monotony of [Seeta], brilliant and wonderful as she is. He will miss the freshness of an English intellect. That pleasant talk under the trees today; could that girl have followed what they [Grace and Brandon] had said? Impossible! ... No! this won’t do. It can’t last. There must be unity of thought, or no thought at all, to provide married happiness. (196)

While Seeta is able to fulfill all of the duties of a *Hindu* wife, her position within her marriage is inalterably defined in racialized (and therefore inferior) terms.

Seeta’s ability to step into the role of British wife is further complicated by the fully native child from her previous marriage. Though the child conveniently dies, the presence of Seeta’s wholly Indian offspring complicates Brandon’s perception of her and blemishes the white space in which the Englishman attempts to reinscribe his bride-to-be. Avoiding the issue of the interracial child undermines Taylor’s attempt to bridge the great gulf fixed between the Indians and their English sovereigns. Taylor continues to shy away from the figure of the mixed-race child when Seeta and Brandon, once married, fail to produce offspring. While Seeta and Brandon are able to come from two disparate ethnicities and forge a relationship in the liminal space between their respective races, the

presence of an interracial child would fracture the racial binary present in the novel and create a distinct third sphere marked by a defiance of caste and subsequent contamination. As Patrick Brantlinger argues, “between British racism and Hindu fanaticism about purity of caste and belief... there is little to choose” (214). By writing the interracial child, Taylor would make a choice that would essentially undo the two opposing camps.

Seeta’s undeniable and irreversible Indianness bars her from a life of domestic marital bliss with Brandon; her presence in the English domestic space is “a violation of the historical narratives of both colonizer and colonized” (Ray 76). Since Grace Mostyn has unconsciously usurped Seeta’s role of perfect wife and Brandon has already been constructed as the ideal Englishman, Seeta is doomed to die: “when the black bride is gone... there will be room for a white one” (Taylor 183). However, she does not merely fade away into the background. True to her epic namesake, Seeta sacrifices herself in the name of her husband. On the outbreak of mutiny, Brandon comes face to face with Azráel Pandé, the symbol of the savage mutineer. In this confrontation, Pandé is robbed of all traces of humanity and appears possessed by murderous intent; he is described as “more terrible to look on than ever, his eyes staring, and his livid shattered face convulsed with passion” (377). Pandé attacks Brandon with his spear and though the Englishman successfully parries the first attack, a piercing blow soon disarms him.

[Brandon] was entirely at his enemy’s mercy. “Jey Kalee Mata!” shouted Azráel. “Dog of a Feringee! No escape now for thee,” and as he drew back his deadly weapon to strike, Cyril heard a cry—it was not a scream—and Seeta had rushed before him, receiving the blow in her breast. Then Captain Hobson, who had tried to save Seeta, or, as he first thought, Cyril, plunged his sword into the ruffian’s heart, who, writhing impaled upon the weapon for an

instant, fell to the ground and was dispatched, if indeed he
 lived, by Buldeo, with repeated thrusts of his own spear.
 (377)

By taking the deathblow in place of her husband, Seeta embodies the sacrificial spirit of the epic Sati without actually committing self-immolation. However, in this case, her self-sacrifice also serves to further distance her from the culture of India and, consequently, association with the epic Sati. Seeta places herself firmly between these two men so that she might protect the Englishman from harm at the hands of a native. She constructs herself in opposition to her culture. Significantly, this solid realignment with the West cannot be sustained; Seeta can complete her racial border crossing and her attempt to do so claims her life. In her death, Seeta opens up the possibility for the restoration of the cultural status quo as the path is now clear for Grace and Brandon to marry. While Seeta's Indianness prevents her from being fully accepted into British society, her learned Englishness traits taint her from becoming the embodiment of the epic Seeta. While the epic Seeta, who when asked to defend her virtue time and time again finally prays to the Earth to open and swallow her whole, Taylor's Seeta, unable to reconcile her two disparate roles—that of the English domestic and the Indian—is “enshrined as a domestic goddess only through imagistic representation” (Ray 76).

However, even in death, Seeta remains divided by her conflicting representations. In her would-be-home in England, a portrait of Seeta hangs in Brandon's study at Hylton Hall – a room specifically designated to hold the relics of his time in India. This “den” is “hung round with Indian trophies of the chase, and Indian arms and hog spears... and finished drawings of Indian landscapes and figures” (Taylor, 441). The focus of the room, however, is a “large masterly drawing in water colour, of a fair Indian lady, simply

dressed in white muslin drapery,” (441). In death Seeta is reduced to the anglicized figure that Brandon first coveted; “In Cyril’s initial encounter with Seeta, her indiginity had been mitigated by his comparison of her to Titian’s paintings of European women. In the end she becomes one of those portraits” (Ray 76). The last image we see of Seeta is heavily coded within Brandon’s English ideals, yet even in her anglicized depiction (one that emphasizes her “fair[ness]”), her likeness is still unfit to hang in the Hylton familial portrait gallery. In the end, the Indian wife is relegated to the “den” of Brandon’s native past.

While the anglicized representation of the Hindu bride dominates Brandon’s den, Seeta’s body is subject to further reinterpretation by the West. “Below [the portrait’s] rich frame is another oval frame made like a large locket, and lined with crimson velvet, in which are a long tress of wavy, deep brown hair, almost black, but which where the light falls, shows a tinge of bright gold” (441). Though this shrine to Seeta is meant to be reverential, it actually undermines her sanctity. By claiming a piece of Seeta, even in the form of her hair, Brandon unknowingly bars her from becoming the epic Sati. In the ceremony of sati, the shaving of the widow’s head is deemed necessary in order to divest the widow of her sexuality. Whereas before marriage, an Indian girl is pure and virginal, after marriage she has transformed into a sexual being. If her husband dies, however, this becomes problematic and her hair becomes a marker of her feminine sexuality:

Sacred power clings to a woman and, as long as it is under control, lends to her life and to that of her husband auspiciousness and sacred correctness. But it is a power which must be kept firmly under control, lest it wreak havoc. Thus women must carefully observe chastity... After the death of her husband, she is especially dangerous and must shave her head, cake it with mud, sleep on a bed

of stones... she is so infected with magic power that she must take her own life. (Stein 468)

If hair represents sexual power, the widow must willingly divest herself of her tresses in order for her to find purity and sainthood in death. Brandon's decision to keep a lock of Seeta's hair enshrined in his den bars her from becoming the epic Sati. This notion that fragmenting the Indian body bars a woman from the Hindu sacred sphere is echoed in Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters*, in which the widowed Tara is thwarted in her attempts to commit sati by the aptly-named James Greyman (the alias of former British officer Jim Douglas). When she attempts to reclaim her place as a sati woman (twelve years after the act should have occurred), Greyman intervenes again by laying "sacrilegious hands" on the hair Tara was, as a matter of ceremony, forced to shear:

Tara gave a cry of dismay, but he was too quick for her, and dangled a long lock before her very eyes, in jesting, but stern decision.

‘That settles it, Tara. You can go to Gunga now if you like, and bathe and be as holy as you like. But there will be no Fire or Water. Do you understand?’

She looked at the hand holding the hair with the oddest expression, though she said obstinately, ‘I shall drown if I choose.’

‘Why should you choose?’ he asked... You can't even sacrifice your hair, really, so long as I have this bit—‘
He began to roll the lock around his finger, neatly. (Steel, 72)

Because Greyman keeps a lock of Tara's hair, the widow is unable to give herself wholly over to sati because the lock binds her to the Earthly sphere and to Greyman. The Englishman recognizes this fact and exploits it in an effort to save Tara; so long as Greyman has even a "bit" of her, Tara's intended sacrifice is meaningless. In order to keep her alive, Greyman fragments her body and places a piece of it in a locket under his guard. By laying their Christian hands on Hindu locks, Greyman and Brandon rob the

sacrifice of sati of its meaning and prevent the Indian women from fully embodying their faith; their “sacrilegious hands” undermine the sanctity of Hindi self-sacrifice.

Though Sangeeta Ray argues that Seeta is “made to occupy a place among the pantheon of Hindu female deities,” Seeta’s position as the saint-like Sati figure is tenuous at best (77). While back in India her grave becomes a sacred space where “Brahmins offer flowers and sing hymns” and where married girls pray for the chance to become sati like Seeta, divinity is undermined by the knowledge that her body has been fragmented and a piece remains in England. Not only does this scrap of hair bar Seeta from being a complete, divine entity, but the lost ringlet is further reinscribed within English iconography. Significantly, though the hair is of the deepest Indian brown, “where the light falls shows a tinge of bright gold” (441). Highlighting the golden streak in Seeta’s hair is akin to emphasizing the streak of Englishness she adopted through her marriage with Brandon.

The golden streak not only undermines Seeta’s Indian appearance, but also the purity of her Hindu spirit. Throughout the course of the novel, Brandon pushes his wife towards conversion to Christianity; after this “dawning of true light” in Seeta, he intends to remarry her through Christian doctrine (273). Though Seeta grapples with the two conflicting religious ideologies of Hinduism and Christianity—and even admits that the words of the Bible are more accessible than the Hindu religious text (the Bhagavad Gita)—at the novel’s conclusion, Seeta still does not fully renounce her Hindu religion in favor of Christianity. On her deathbed, she hears an imagined amalgamation of her two religious doctrines: “strange snatches of her Sanscrit prayers were mingled with lines of simple Christian hymns she had learned” (383). Though she hears both Hindu and

Christian murmurings, Seeta uses her last breath to utter a Hindu prayer: “Suddenly, and as though the vivid light had roused her, she raised herself a little, and stretched out her hands, and said the Vedantic invocation to the sun, which is called Gáyatri” (383). Her Christian friends and husband remain convinced that, had she lived longer, “she would have repeated the hymn also, but she had no strength” (383). Though they believe that Seeta would have recognized Christianity as the true faith if she had but a few more moments to live, Seeta’s final words stand as a Hindu invocation.

This misplaced belief in Seeta’s Christian faith dilutes the reality of her Hindu ideology, as evidenced by Brandon’s interpretation of the lock of hair. While a “vivid light” rouses Seeta to utter a final Hindu prayer, her hair is said to reveal a golden hue “where the light falls.” Given the English idealization of golden hair (as seen in the character of Grace Mostyn), this light that reveals a latent Englishness in Seeta can be read as the Light of God. Elisabeth Gitter examines the significance of golden hair in Victorian fiction in her article, “The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination.” According to Gitter, flaxen locks are a woman’s “aureole, her crown, the outward sign of her inner blessedness and innocence” (943). Given that this golden streak is seen through the eyes of the man desperate to convert Seeta to the Christian faith, the “crown” of “inner blessedness” is, to Brandon, symbolic of the crown of Christ. The Englishman interprets the golden hair as evidence that, in the end, Seeta possessed the “inner blessedness” of Christianity. In this way, Brandon essentially reinterprets Seeta’s faith within a Christian context and robs Seeta’s final Hindu prayer of its legitimacy. While the glint of gold essentially pares away at Seeta’s already compromised sense of nativeness, the fact that Brandon retains a part of Seeta’s body at

all is highly problematic. This hoarding of Seeta's hair is akin to commodifying Seeta within the Christian faith by treating a piece of her body as a relic. The teachings of the Catholic Church concerning the veneration of relics are summed up in a decree of the Council of Trent, which instructs bishops to teach their flocks that "the holy bodies of holy martyrs and of others now living with Christ... [are] to be glorified and venerated by the faithful, for through these [bodies] many benefits are bestowed by God on men" (Hastings 51). Considering that the hair of saints is considered a "first-class relic," enshrining the lock of Seeta's hair strips her of the connection to the epic Sati and instead redefines her as a holy Christian figure. Seeta can never transform into the embodiment of Indian womanly virtue so long as her black ringlet remains encased within Brandon's hold, subject to ethnological reinterpretation under the English gaze.

This legacy of literary dilution of Indian identity and weakening the potency of the figure of the epic sati is continued in Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* (1896). However, in Steel's novel both men and women, English and Indian are subject to compromising of national identity. The first Englishwoman introduced in the text is immediately distinguished as a far cry from the typical English ideal of the angel in the house. Apart from being cruel, coquettish, and incredibly vain, from the moment of introduction, Alice Gissing is seen cavorting with a married man—Kate Erlton's husband, Herbert. For Alice, India provides the opportunity for exploration and advancement; the social hierarchy was far more porous in India at the time than that of England and allowed for women such as Alice to ascend the rungs of society with more alacrity than would have been possible back home – "for the Gissings preferred India, where they were received into society, to England, where they would have been out of it"

(52). Though India provides the opportunity of social advancement for Alice, the possibility for cultural degradation is equally present as she becomes slowly won over by the lure of the exotic, as demonstrated by the manner in which she keeps her house. Kate Erlton, the paragon of English womanly domestic virtues, is careful to cultivate an English garden:

She loved her poor clumps of English annuals more than all the scented and blossoming shrubs which, in those late March days, turned the garden into a wilderness of strange perfumed beauty. Her cult of home was a religion with her; and if a visitor remarked that anything in her environment was reminiscent of the old country, she rejoiced to have given another exile what was to her as the shadow of a rock in a thirsty land. (29)

Alice Gissing, on the other hand, is supremely unconcerned with retaining the markers of her English upbringing:

The Gissings' house stood in a large garden; but though it was wreathed with creepers, and set with flowers after the manner of flowerful Lucknow, *there was no cult of pansies or such like English treasures here*. It was gay with that acclimatized tangle of poppies and larkspur, marigold, mignonette, and corn cockles which Indian gardeners love to sow... there was no cult of England. Everything was frankly, staunchly of the nabob-and-pagoda-tree style (52, emphasis mine).

Where Kate takes pleasure and solace in her so-called “cult of home,” Alice is most comfortable surrounded by the exotic flowers emblematic of the East. Significantly, the English garden is viewed as a manifestation of Christian virtue; Kate’s garden is described as a “cult of home” and a “religion with her.” The cultivation of an English garden within Indian soil is thus seen as a kind of transplantation of an Edenic space; by sowing the seeds of English flowers, Kate strengthens both her sense of English nationhood and her Christian faith. With this in mind, Alice’s rejection of the English

Eden in favor of the native, untamed flowers of India speaks to a larger idea that India undermines English religious convictions. The freedom and relaxed sense of propriety indicative of India not only affords Alice a house that would have been beyond her means back in England, but also allows her to rise to the top of the social ladder and openly engage in an affair with Herbert Erlton with little consequence. While Kate creates a safe haven for herself in the form of her garden to guard against the corruptive influence of India, Alice embraces her exotic new home and gives in to the erotic pleasures that are present there.

Though Alice is easily seduced by the sensuous Indian surroundings, the threat of interracial relationships looms over the pages of the text. As with Taylor's *Seeta*, this fear is embodied in the figure of the interracial child. It's no accident that while Seeta and Brandon failed to produce offspring, Brandon and his white wife, Grace, were able to bear a child (the novel concludes with an image of this child "a girl of three years old, with a profusion of curly golden hair... clinging to her mother's skirts" [317]). Significantly, the white child produced by the marriage between Brandon and Grace inherits the great marker of Englishness and innocence – the a "profusion of curly golden hair." According to Galia Ofek in her exploration of the Victorian hair fetish, darker hair is somehow threatening, "the very embodiment of the risk of male loss" (115). Through his relationship with Seeta, Brandon lost his identity as an English man; he marries Seeta through a Hindu ceremony, he is fired from his position because of this "native connection" (Taylor 238) and he faces scorn from his family back in England. By marrying the flaxen-haired Grace, Brandon is recalled to British life and is able to produce a golden haired child. Grace's blonde locks are a "symbol of talismanic

femininity” that guide Brandon back to the English tradition and displace the threat of Seeta’s dark hair. The fact that her child with Brandon has the same fair hair speaks to the completion of this transition. Brandon has been redeemed by Grace and reclaimed by England; he is now fit to produce a wholly English child.

This fear of miscegenation is further explored in *On the Face of the Waters* through James Greyman’s relationship with his Indian lover, Zora, whom he purchased from a “house of ill-fame” in her girlhood (33). As with *Seeta*, the interracial relationship is somewhat mitigated by Zora’s whiteness and Anglified features; “he had paid a long price for her, not only because she was beautiful, but because he pitied the delicate-looking child... not that his pity would have led him to buy her if she had been ugly, *or even dark*; for the *creamy ivory tint of her skin* satisfied his fastidiousness” (34 emphasis mine). Though the contentiousness of their relationship is somewhat diffused by Zora’s milky complexion, the possibility of a mixed-race child is still present. To stamp out this threat, Steel gifts Zora with a sickly and ephemeral existence—from her introduction in the text, the “poor little soul” is seen “drifting to death, almost as the animals drift, without complaint, without fears, or hopes” (40). This construction of Zora as bestial is carried throughout her brief pages of the text. She is described alternatively as a “playful...kitten” (34), “a tired squirrel” (41), and a “wounded bird” (42). This degradation is precisely why Greyman can never fully love Zora and why he is repulsed by the idea of having a child with her. In Greyman’s eyes their unequal footing makes the idea of sharing a child akin to some form of debasement and contamination. When their infant is stillborn, rather than regretting that his son has died, Greyman is relieved he will not have to feign love for a mixed-race child:

Yet some men he had known had seemed able to combine the two lives. They had been content to think half-caste thoughts, to rear up a tribe of half-caste children; while he? How many years was it since he had seen Zora weeping over a still little morsel of humanity, his child and hers, that lay in her tinselled veil? She had wept, mostly because she was afraid he might be angry because his son had never drawn breath, and he had comforted her. He had never told her of the relief it was to him, of the vague repulsion which the thought of a child had always brought with it. (41)

This “repulsion” that Greyman feels is borne out of the knowledge that the English and the Indian, however close they may be, will always be divided. Even though Greyman shared a passionate affair with Zora for over eight years, throughout their relationship he remained acutely aware of the insurmountable racial divide that lay between them. Even on her deathbed, he cannot dismiss the feeling that her Indian frame simply can’t compare with the grandeur of the West:

As he stood, still looking down on the sleeper, something in the lack of comfort, of all the refinements and luxuries which seem to belong by right to the sickness of dear ones in the West, smote him suddenly with a sense of deprivation, of division... the bareness of it seemed somehow to reveal the great gulf between his complexities, his endless needs and desires, and the simplicity of that human creature drifting to death. (40)

The simple, animalistic Zora is ultimately ill-suited for Greyman and will never be able to satisfy his “endless needs and desires” like an Englishwoman would. As such, the Indian woman is not the rightful mother of the English child and, in this text, her body is literally not strong enough to produce an English heir; she withers and dies just as her child with Greyman did in her womb. Greyman’s perception of Western superiority over Eastern primitivism bars Zora from ever really earning his respect; “It was the glow and the glamour that had been the bond between them—nothing else” (41). Because

Greyman enjoys the erotic thrill of the young woman, Zora is fit to be his exotic mistress; however, it is precisely her exoticism that bars her from ever earning the mantle of wife or mother. After Zora's death, her caretaker Tara entreats Greyman to allow her the "right of wailing," a Hindu funeral rite, claiming that "she will feel silent in the grave without the voices of her race" (43). At this mention of a Hindu ceremony and the "voices of [Zora's] race," Greyman, who had been tenderly holding Zora's hand, "drew his hand away sharply; even in death a great gulf lay fixed between him and the woman he had loved" (43). Significantly, as soon as the reality of the cultural divide crashes down upon him, Greyman withdraws his hand from the dead Indian Other as if her body is tainted with the dark stains of her race.

Not only is the Indian unable to produce children with the English of this novel, but the image of the darker Other seems to serve as an ever-present threat to the safety of wholly English adolescents. This idea is illustrated by the death of Alice Gissing's child through her first marriage. With her first husband, Saumarez,⁷ Alice bore a son that died in infancy. Significantly, the child died in India; Alice pays a weekly pilgrimage to its little grave to mourn and leave a bouquet of flowers. Alice provides only one account of the dead baby: "it had been so pretty, dark like its father, who had been a very handsome man" (58). Considering that Greyman's mixed-race child with Zora was stillborn, the fact that the only distinguishing feature of the dead baby is its darkness suggests that darkness is somehow a marker for death, especially in children.

⁷ Most likely an allusion to the de Saumarez, an old island family from Guernsey notable for their pan-generational service in the Royal Navy

Alice's choice of bouquets for visiting her child's grave underlines this idea that the presence of darkness/nativeness is somehow tied to infanticide. When Alice's servants prepare the Englishwoman for the weekly ceremony, her gardener would hand up the bouquet. After witnessing this ritual several times, Herbert Erlton, in a gesture of sentimental compassion, decides to contribute to the offering; "He went so far once as to bring an additional bouquet of pansies from his wife's pet bed" (57). However, Alice balks at the proffered arrangement, claiming that the pansies' fragility make them ill-suited for her purposes:

Pansies withered so soon, she said, and as the bouquet had to last a whole week, something less fragile was better. Indeed, the gardener's bouquets, compact, hard, with blossoms all jammed into little spots of colour among the protruding sprigs of privet, were more suited to her calm permanency of regret than the passionate purple posy which looked so pathetically out of place in the big man's course hands. She had taken it from him, however, and strewn the already drooping flowers about the marble. They looked lovely, she had said, though the others were best. (58-9)

Significantly, the flowers that Alice snubs were taken from Kate Erlton's replicated English sphere—the garden she refers to as her "cult of home." While Alice admits that the flowers are lovely, she also recognizes their weakness; they will make a pitiful offering once they have withered under the unforgiving Indian sun. Just as her child perished on Indian soil, the pansies have already begun to droop when they are placed upon his grave. Contact with the native world causes the vitality of England – as represented by the pansies – to fade. The deadly power of India is represented in Alice's preferred bouquet. While "compact, hard" flowers are indicative of the harsh conditions of the East, the true danger lies in the "protruding sprigs of privet." The Indian privet is

best distinguished by its “heavily scented flowers and poisonous black berries.”⁸ It is no coincidence that the dark berries of India are ripe with venom. It is this Eastern poison that quickly infects her child, dark from birth, and leads to its premature demise. The child, the product of a union between an English husband and wife, could not find sustenance on Indian soil and was consequently buried in it. The only child of the text to escape the corrosive influence of India is, unsurprisingly, the child who avoids the East entirely; Kate Erlton’s son was left behind in England and consequently avoids contamination by the East and escapes the horrors of the Mutiny (“I have a son in England and he will have to go to school soon” [24]). The precious pansies, an undeniable marker of England, are representative of the decay that the English face on the shores of India.

While the exoticism of the East is proven harmful to the children of the West, the English presence in India results in a mutually destructive relationship for both cultures. In the novel’s opening scene, Alice Gissing and Herbert Erlton are seen riding through an auction of the King of Oude’s menagerie. When Alice decides to buy an old, screeching cockatoo to save it from having its neck wrung and used for food by the poor bidders, the bird involuntarily becomes the staging ground for a conflict between the East and West. Though another bidder repeatedly attempts to claim the bird, Herbert can’t interpret the piercing Hindi scream the bird makes and seizes upon the creature as an opportunity to prove himself in Alice’s eyes:

‘Deen! Deen! Futteh Mahomed.’ (For the Faith! For the Faith! victory to Mohammed.)

⁸ “Privet.” *Oxford Dictionaries Online - English Dictionary and Language Reference*. N.p., n.d. Web. 8 Mar. 2011. <http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_us1280846#m_en_us1280846

The war cry of the fiercest of all faiths was unmistakable; the first two syllables cutting the air, keen as a knife, the last with the blare as of a trumpet in them. And the following close on their heels came an indescribable sound... it was a faint murmur from the crowd till then so silent. (18)

This lack of understanding of the Indian language sets in motion a series of events that eventually lead to Alice's death at the hands of the rightful owner of the bird. Because he does not recognize the danger of the Great Cry, Herbert makes a gift of the bird to the young English child, Sonny Seymour – who stands as a personification of innocence and English purity in the text. This bird stands as an amalgamation of strength and containment: “changing hands, houses, colors, and meanings, but retaining its cry for Mohammed's victory, the bird reminds us in a dramatic way that the Other can never be fully contained” (Mallonee 28). Just as the bird cannot be contained, the rage of the Indian cannot be quelled. However, because Herbert does not pay for the bird, he unknowingly marks Sonny as a potential victim. Enraged that the *huzoor* (a Hindi word meaning “my lord,” or “master”) cheated him out of his own bird, the creature's fanatical owner swears vengeance upon the Englishman claiming “The bird may yet give the Great Cry in the house of the thief” (20). This unwillingness to learn of the Indian language in a sense marks the English for death.

Unfortunately, this refusal to become educated in the culture of India seems to be shared by the majority of the English characters of the text. One of the first images we get of Kate Erlton, the heroine of the novel, reveals her shrinking away from the Indian natives:

An old man in a faded green turban who stood close beside the groom, and who, seeing her turn, salaamed, and with clasped hands began an appeal of some sort...

unconsciously she drew back to the furthest corner of the carriage, as if to escape from what she did not understand and therefore did not like. That, indeed, was her attitude towards all things native; though at times, as now, she felt a dim regret at her own ignorance... the innate repulsion of the alien overpowered her dim desire to be kind. (20)

Once again, had Kate recognized the appeal that the turbaned man, the owner of the wrongfully purchased cockatoo and Alice's eventual murderer, the life of Alice Gissing may have been spared.

While the British lack of understanding and consideration for the people of India is detrimental to the English of the novel, this cultural ignorance is equally harmful for the Indian characters with whom they come into contact. This possibility for mutual destruction is brought to a head when Alice and Herbert race down the country road together in a dogcart. Though the roads are not designed for such speeds, the couple recklessly gallops onward until they accidentally strike and kill a young native girl.

There is never much to do when all has been done in an instant. There had been a sudden causeless leaving of the mother's side, a toddling child among the shadows, a quick oath, a mad rear as the mare, checked by the hands like a vice for strength, snapped the shafts as if they had been straws. No delay, no recklessness; but one of these iron-shod hoofs as it was flung out, had caught the child full on the temple, and there was no need to ask what that curved blue mark meant, which had gone crashing into the skull. (60)

Had Alice and Herbert recognized and respected the limitations of the Indian roads, they would not have run over the child.

This lack of understanding for the Indian world is further underlined by the way Herbert views the mourning mother: "there was no sound for a minute save... a low animal-like whimper from the mother, who, after one wild shriek, had sunk down in the

dust beside the dead child, looking at the purple bruise dully, and clasping her living baby tighter to her breast. For it, thank the gods! was the boy. That one with the mark on its forehead only the girl” (60). From the Englishman’s perspective, the Indian woman, as with Zora, is constructed as little more than a beast; Herbert views the devastated woman as “low” and “animal-like,” while the woman who killed her child, Alice, is still as elevated in his thoughts as ever. Herbert makes sure to put the precious Alice safely on a dogcart and hurry her away from the dreadful scene so as not to spoil her with such unpleasantries. Nevertheless, Alice soon reveals that her white skin masks a darker temperament and prejudice:

‘We were going a frightful pace, but you saw he had the mare in hand. He is awfully strong you know.’ She paused and a reflectively-complacent smile stole to her face. ‘I suppose you will think it horrid,’ she went on; ‘but it doesn’t feel to me like killing a human being, you know. I’m sorry, of course, but I should have been much sorrier if it had been a white baby. Wouldn’t you?’

She set aside his evasion remorselessly. ‘I know that! People say, of course, that it is wicked not to feel the same towards people whether they’re black or white. But we don’t. They feel just the same about us because we are white.’ (61)

Here Alice fully embodies the cold indifference of the *memsahib*.⁹ Yet even though Alice broadcasts her racism and effectively admits that she feels no remorse for wrongful killing the Indian child, the Englishmen around her still view her as something to be exalted and protected. When the dogcart transfers Alice to the young Mainwaring’s

⁹ As Pat Barr described this stereotype in her work, *The Mem Sahibs: The Women of Victorian India*, the *memsahib* was “frivolous, vain, sometimes adulterous, a heartless bitch with an ever-tinkling laugh” (London: Secker & Warburg, 1976, 197).

buggy, Mainwaring “felt as if an angel had fluttered down from the skies to the worn broken-sprunged cushion beside him; an angel to be guarded from humanity—even her own” (61). Though Alice is still widely regarded as beautiful and angelic, the cruelty she betrayed at the death of the Indian child throws her position as the English “angel in the house”¹⁰ into question and suggests that the Englishwoman may, in fact, be more inhuman than the mourning Indian mother. As demonstrated by the disconnect between Alice Gissing’s true nature and how she is perceived by others, the concept of the English angel in the house cannot remain intact when relocated to India.

The fate of Alice Gissing encapsulates the threat that India poses to the Englishwoman. On the day Kate Erlton confronts Alice about her licentious affair with Kate’s husband, Herbert, the first swells of the Mutiny begin to crash down upon them. On the heels of their confrontation marches a regiment of mutinous Sepoys that attacks Delhi just as Alice Gissing admits that she is pregnant with Herbert’s child. Kate, though “half-choked” by the news, is overwhelmed by the “jealousy of motherhood” (193). Alice usurps her position as mother one last time. Suddenly, the air is pierced by a child’s scream. Sonny, who had become “a great solace to [Kate’s] child-bereft life,” was under threat by an Indian. The fanatical owner of the cockatoo finally hears the Great Cry and, with murder in his heart, chases down the English child. Knowing that

¹⁰ The ideal of the “angel in the house,” a phrase taken from the poem by the same name written by Coventry Patmore in 1854, primarily constructs Woman as the moral center of the household who lives to serve her husband. This repressive ideal plagues literature into the twentieth century. As Virginia Woolf put it best, “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.”

Sonny's failing feet will not be able to outrun the Indian for much longer, Kate springs into action. Though "every atom of motherhood in her" fights to open the bolts of the window, Kate cannot move quick enough to rescue Sonny (194). Instead, Alice Gissing heroically takes her place as savior:

Another vision of white, and gold, and blue, dashing into the sunlight with something in a clenched right hand; childish itself in frills, and laces, and ribbons, but with a face as relentless as the old man's, as spiritual... On it went, swift and straight into the sunlight... The lance wavered. It was two feet further from that soft flesh and blood when Alice Gissing caught the child up, turned, and ran—ran for dear life to shelter. (194)

Significantly, Sonny does not find salvation in the embrace of Kate, the noble and virtuous Englishwoman, but in the arms of Alice – an adulteress who is carrying the child of another woman's husband. Not only is Alice the rightful savior of the English child, but in her last moments of life she becomes the embodiment of *the* Mother, the Virgin Mary. Her flowing garments of "white, and gold, and blue" invoke the image of the Virgin, who is often depicted wearing the same colors. Though "every atom of motherhood" rises up in Kate to defend Sonny, in the end Alice Gissing supplants her position as mother. Significantly, death finds Alice just moments after this transformation from adulteress coquette into an incarnation of the Virgin Mary. She rescues the child from certain death, but in doing so Alice falls prey to a piercing blow from the fanatic's lance. Her tragic and heroic end "transforms [Alice] into the figure of English womanhood that British soldiers carry into battle" (Sharpe 99). Though Sharpe argues that having Alice serve as such a figure instead of Kate undermines the legitimacy of such a vision of English womanhood, I believe that Kate's final moments of redemption highlight the tragedy of her death and the purity of Englishness when under

threat by the native. By constructing Alice's final flight to invoke the Virgin Mary, Steel reveals the real threat that the native poses to the Englishwoman: the Mohammedan fanatic's lance strikes down the embodiment of Western Christianity as the "war cry of the fiercest of all faiths" rings out overhead. Not only is Alice as the Virgin slain by the Indian fanatic, but her unborn English child is cut down as well. The threat that the Indian poses is thus threefold: he endangers the Englishwoman, the Christian faith, and the future of England through targeting Sonny and ultimately killing Alice's unborn child.

Though Alice's appearance invokes the Virgin Mary during her final moments, her death by the fanatic's lance is hauntingly resonant with the death of Seeta in Taylor's novel. Both women place themselves in the path of an Indian's spear so that they might save an Englishman from death. Given that Philip Meadows Taylor penned *Seeta* twenty-five years prior to Steel's *On the Face of the Water*, this striking similarity cannot go unexamined. In Seeta's sacrifice, she becomes the embodiment of the epic Sati. Because Alice's death links her so closely to the heroine of Taylor's novel, the Englishwoman becomes vicariously associated with the Hindu goddess. This association pollutes the image of the Englishwoman as Christian deity by recasting her through a Hindi lens. By embodying the Virgin Mary yet dying like an Indian woman, Alice's death speaks to a contamination of both the Englishwoman and the touchstone of Englishness itself – the Christian faith. Although there's no definitive evidence that Steel read *Seeta*, Taylor was a widely read author of the time. His first novel, the semi-documentary *Confessions of a Thug* (1839) was "an instant success with the English public; Queen Victoria was an early and avid reader" (Sutherland 627). Given the

undeniable similarities between the two scenes, Taylor's commercial success, and Steel's personal interest in the fiction of India, it is reasonable to assume that Steel read Taylor's work. With this in mind, Steel conjures a pan-theological heroine. Alice is neither the epic Seeta nor the Virgin Mary; her ethnic ties to one will always pollute her ability to embody the other.

While Alice's death speaks to a fear of symbolic contamination, her untimely end betrays a fear of sexual violation as well. It is no accident that Alice meets her death at the sharp end of the Mohammedan fanatic's lance. The penetrative nature of this act speaks to the English fear of their women becoming sexual prey to their Indian subjects. The fear of the Indian wreaking sexual violence upon the Englishwoman is seen in the political cartoons of the time:



Perhaps the most iconic image of the Mutiny, “The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger,”¹¹ depicts a ravenous Indian, represented by the Bengal Tiger, attacking the naked, vulnerable body of a white woman. This image perfectly encapsulates the commonly held perspective of the British during the Mutiny: the Indian is a sexual threat to the Englishwoman. Both the history and the fiction of the Indian Mutiny are rife with images and stories of British women having to defend their sexual virtue against the Sepoy rebels. In some instances, these stories have become hyperbolized and absorbed into the mythos of the Mutiny. Such is the case with the apocryphal story of Ulrica Wheeler, the daughter of General Wheeler who was stationed at Cawnpore. Allegedly, rather than face degradation and rape at the hands of her would-be Muslim captors – a fate worse than death – Miss Wheeler took up arms against the Indian rebels and killed her abductor and his family before taking her own life.¹² The hypothetical heroism of Miss Wheeler became an image of the ideal Englishwoman—one who was willing to sacrifice her life rather than risk sexual contamination by the native¹³.

¹¹ “The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger,” a print by Sir John Tenniel, was originally published in the August issue of *Punch* magazine in 1857.

¹² Chakravarty, Gautam. *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.

¹³ “Miss Wheeler Defending Herself Against the Sepoys at Cawnpore.” From Charles Ball’s *History of the Indian Mutiny* (1858).



Alice Gissing's death at the hand of the fanatic explores this inherent disgust for the idea of the Indian violating and polluting English purity. Though James Greyman runs to her aid and shoots her attacker, he arrives too late to save her from the lance's tip:

He saw a broken shaft among the frills and ribbons, a slow stream oozing in gushes to dye them crimson. There was another spot, too, on the shoulder showing where a bullet, after crashing through a man's temples, had found its spent resting place. But as the Englishman kicked away one body, and raised the other tenderly from the unhurt child, so as not to stir that broken shaft, *he wished that if death had had to come, he might have dealt it. To his wild rage, his insane hatred, there seemed a desecration even in that cold touch of steel from a dark hand.* (194-5 emphasis mine)

Beyond reason or logic, Greyman instinctively feels that Alice's death at the hands of an Indian speaks to some form of desecration for the beautiful white woman. Alice, with her blonde ringlets and wide blue eyes, "childish... in frills and laces and ribbons," represents the English ideal of the time for women. Yet in her final moments, she comes to embody the holiest woman in Western society. The death of this woman – a societal

and religious ideal – by a dark Mohammedan hand is unbearable for Greyman. His wish to have dealt the deathblow instead of the fanatic speaks to his desire to simultaneously sexually possess her, yet protect her from sexual violation at the hand of the Indian man. This scene presents the most sexually explicit image of the novel. The white woman's violent penetration by the Indian Other can only be interpreted as a rape. The Englishman is left helpless, filled with "impotent regret," and forced to do nothing as the blood, the physical evidence of sexual penetration, slowly stains the violated Englishwoman (196). The suggestion that the penetration of an Englishwoman by a native leaves Greyman "impotent" only further underlines the pervasive English fear of their women falling victim to sexual violence. If the Indian steps into the sexual role of the Englishman by penetrating the white woman, then the Englishman is symbolically castrated. The threat of sexual violence against Englishwomen by the Indian is thus twofold: it represents a contamination of English female purity, and an emasculation of the Englishman.

While Alice Gissing's death speaks to the fear of sexual pollution by the dark Other, the threat of contamination by India is not always necessarily a sexual one. Before her death at the hands of the fanatic, Alice was already succumbing to the allure of India. Not only does she refuse to cultivate the proper English garden, but her basic temperament more closely resembles the Indian women than her English counterparts. While she outwardly maintains all the girlish charms expected of a young English lady, inwardly she is more akin to the somber, steady Indian woman. Her true nature is first revealed at an English Officer party where she is almost bitten by a poisonous snake. Just moments before, Alice was parading her girlish insecurities and silly fears: "I'm so

glad Major Erlton managed to get leave. I'm such a coward! I should have died of fright all by myself in that long, lonely—' (123). Her words are interrupted at the appearance of a snake at her feet. Though Greyman seizes her with "swift unceremonious arms" to keep her from fainting, he quickly realizes that such precautions are unnecessary:

The heart she felt beat hard; and the one beneath his hand gave a bound and then seemed to stand still, as the sticks and staves, hastily caught up, smote furiously on her very dress, so close did certain death lie to her... he never forgot the passionate admiration which made his hands relax with infinite tenderness, when she uttered no cry, no sound—when there was no need to hold her, so still did she stand, so absolutely in unison with the defiance of Fate which kept him steady as a rock. (124)

Alice's calm demeanor even in the face of death is a far cry from the typical image of the fainting female of the English Victorian era. She betrays this stolid interiority once more before her death. When news of the marching Sepoy rebels reaches her and Kate Erlton in a letter given by her Indian Mai, Kate reacts with a "passionate cry" befitting a typical Englishwoman (193). Conversely, Alice "looked at [Kate] with a faint wonder," as if unable to understand her frenzied behavior (193). When she looks over the letter that tells of the death of the Commissioner and fellow Englishmen, Alice's face "though it had whitened, showed no fear" (193). She maintains her composure before quickly addressing her hysteric Mai: "'Oh! don't be a fool, Mai!' she went on in Hindustani, 'I won't excite myself. I never do'... Her foot came down almost savagely" (193). Unlike Kate who dissolves into near-hysterics, Alice maintains a level head, which marks her as separate from the typical feminine English sphere. The idea that Alice's foot comes down "savagely" and her use of Hindustani when addressing the Mai further underline this idea that her unemotional manner in the face of danger is somehow savage or Indian.

Taylor's Seeta shares this kind of passivity. In the eponymous narrative, Seeta is constructed as a brave and hearty woman. In this way, she is diametrically opposed to the Englishwomen of the text. Seeta, who was willing to take up arms against her Indian brethren in support of the English, speaks of this inherent difference to Grace after her first battle with Brandon against the rebels: "We women of India are used to rougher scenes than you," she says to the alarmed white woman (289). Just as Seeta's stoicism sets her in opposition to the English women, Alice's fortitude does the same. She cannot be seen as wholly English because both in manner and speech, she has become Indian.

Alice is further linked to the Indian through the ability to manipulate through sexuality. At the auction, Alice goads Herbert into buying the cursed cockatoo that ultimately marks her for death. Significantly, when the price of the animal begins to skyrocket, Herbert starts to back off, knowing that he is already in debt. "Then Alice Gissing laughed. The woman's laugh of derision which is responsible for so much" (17). In a desperate attempt to prove himself, Herbert places an exorbitant bid on the creature: "Fifty rupees! because a woman laughed!" (18). Alice's ability to goad men into action through sexuality is shared by the Indian woman. When the message was sent out to the men of India to take action against their British sovereigns, the words of Mutiny weren't spoken first by soldiers in the barracks, but by prostitutes in the "lane of lust":

"We of the bazaar kiss no cowards," she said derisively.

"Where are your comrades?"

The man to whom she said it, a young dissolute-faced trooper, dressed in the loose rakish muslins beloved by his class... stood for a second in the stifling maddening atmosphere of musk and rose and orange-blossom; stood before all those insolent allurements, balked in his passion, checked in his desires. Then, with an oath, he dashed from her insulting charms; dashed into the street with a cry—

“To horse! To horse, brothers! To the jail! To our comrades!”

The word had been spoken. The speech which brings more than speech, had come from the painted lips of a harlot.
(160-1)

Just as Alice was able to coax Herbert into action, the prostitutes attack the masculinity of the wandering soldier and provoke him into inciting the Mutiny. This sexual prowess and the danger it represents links Alice to the Indian woman. Alice is not the pure Kate Erlton, the image of the uncompromising English woman and symbol of Western virtue; she is far more similar in temperament to the Indian woman. This comparison is made all the more pronounced by the figure of Zeenut Maihl, the fierce Indian Queen. When word of the Mutiny reaches her ears, Zeenut is determined to do her part to rouse the Sepoys into further action. Though she is not the rightful “defender of the faith” – that title is claimed by her husband, the King – Zeenut uses all of the powers of her sex and title to sway the men in power to do her bidding. When her older and more cowardly husband shies away from the task of stirring up the mutineers, Zeenut tosses all thoughts of propriety aside and appears before her people before she has had a chance to shroud herself properly: “With reckless hand she set the lattice wide, so becoming visible for an instant, and a shout of ‘The Queen! The Queen!’ mingled with that other of ‘The Faith!’ (180). After Zeenut appears before her people so improperly dressed, the King is emasculated: he “[trembles] with impotent passion, inherited from passions that had not been impotent... ignoring the Queen, who, he felt, was mostly to blame for this outrage on her modesty. Why had she come there? Why had she dared to be seen?” (181). It is this appearance of Zeenut and challenge to her modesty that stirs the King’s blood. Only after Zeenut usurps his masculine position as the head of the nation does he decide to

appear before his people to “speak [his] own words” (180). However, his attempt to reclaim his manhood is entirely thwarted. Before the King confers with the mutineers, Zeenut is asked to leave so that she might do no further damage to her modesty: “‘The King can scarce receive the Captain-sahib here in the presence of the Consort.’ He did not add—“in her present costume”—but his tone implied it” (181). Zeenut, however, is not bullied into obedience by this insult. Rather than sinking away into her chambers, she casts aside all thoughts of etiquette and speaks, dressed as she is, before her people:

She dashed to the open lattice again, scornful and defiant; dignified into positive beauty for the moment by her recklessness.

“For the Faith!” she cried in her shrill woman’s voice, “if ye are men, as I would be, to be loved of woman, as I am, strike for the Faith!”

A sort of shiver ran through the clustering crowd of men below; the shiver of anticipation, or the marvelous, the unexpected. The Queen had spoken to them as men; of herself as a woman... Their blood thrilled, the instinct of the man to fight for the woman rose at once. (181)

It is not merely her words that urge the men into action; her sexual presence as a woman stirs the mutineers. The sexual politics of this scene are indicative of the gender dynamics of the mutiny as a whole. By speaking to the Sepoys as men and herself as a woman, the Queen turns a battle of cultures into a challenge of virility and masculinity. This idea is voiced early on by the Indian soldier, Soma: “War and Women go together, East and West” (36). In this text, the ability to exploit the body and use sexuality as a tool of manipulation is a marked trait of the Indian woman. The fact that Alice also possesses this ability, coupled with her preference for the atmosphere of India, demonstrates the corruptive influence of the East over the English woman. In India,

Alice is lost to the sensuous and grows in likeness to the sexually manipulative native woman.

Alice is not the only English character to be won over by the sway of the Indian. After being discharged from the military over an affair with a woman, Jim Douglas renounced his ties to his former life and remade himself as James Greyman; he finds an Indian lover in Zora, he learns the language of the country, and he often disguises himself as a native. As an Englishman living in India as a native, Greyman comes to dwell in the liminal space between cultures. His interstitiality is revealed during his first introduction in the novel. When he meets Kate, she is struck by his indefinable nature:

He was a man of about forty, looking younger than his age, taller than his real height, by reason of his beardless face and the extreme ease and grace of his figure. He was burnt *brown as a native* by his constant exposure to the sun; but as he stooped to pick up his glove, which had slipped from his hold, a *rim of white* showed above his wrist. (24 emphasis mine)

As Kate notes, Greyman's appearance is somehow inherently deceiving—he is younger than his age, taller than his height, and darker than his race. When Alice first meets him, she is struck most by his apparent nativeness, the only hint of his English identity being the mere rim of white about his wrist. His liminal racial identity is stressed throughout the course of the novel: he adopts the “disguise of a frontiersman” when he wants to blend in with a crowd (64) and becomes the apprentice of Tiddu, one of the “thousand-faced people” (66), so that he may more easily disguise his “English toes in a native shoe” (68). Greyman's ability to slip into the guise of the Indian is emphasized even as he rushes to save Alice Gissing: “Ah! who was that dressed like a native, riding like an Englishman” (194). Greyman exists on the threshold between the known and the native;

he is at once an honorable Englishman and a roguish Indian. Once the Mutiny hits Lucknow, Greyman's border-identity saves Kate from death by native hands. Dressed as a Sepoy rebel, Greyman "[rides] through the thick of the devils with [Kate] as [his] prisoner... he answered the crowd in its own kind, recklessly; a laugh, an oath, once or twice a blow with the flat of his sword" (198). By immersing himself in Indian culture, Greyman is able to safely traverse the blood-spattered streets that have already claimed the lives of lesser Englishmen.

Greyman's interstitiality is a far cry from the unassailably English identity that Kate so meticulously cultivates before the Mutiny. Once the rebels claimed the city, however, her cult of English domesticity becomes her greatest liability and an Indian woman claims her role as mother to Sonny – a position already usurped by Alice Gissing. Once the situation in Lucknow begins to rapidly deteriorate, Greyman orders Kate to leave Sonny in the care of Alice's ayah: "He is safer with her than he could be with you. She must have friends in the city. You haven't *one*" (196). The realization that her own ignorance of India has robbed her of a second chance to act as mother to Sonny strikes Kate like a physical blow.

Not a friend! No! not one... So while the ayah, still carrying Sonny, returned to her dead mistress, Kate remained in the drawing room, feeling stunned. Too stunned to think of anything save those last words. Not a friend! Not one, saving a few cringing shop-keepers, in all that wide city to whom she had ever spoken a word! Whose fault was that? Whose fault was it that she had not understood that appeal? (196-7)

Had Kate been willing to shed her "innate repulsion of the alien" when interacting with the natives, she might have been able to care for both Sonny and herself during the crisis (20). Because she cannot understand the turbaned fanatic's appeal, the bird falls into

Sonny's possession, putting the child – the symbol England's future – in jeopardy. Kate must bear the blame not only for her own ignorance, but also for the endangerment of Sonny and the subsequent death of Alice Gissing.

After smuggling Kate through the streets, Greyman hides her under his servant Tara's keeping in his rooftop apartment. With her life under threat, Kate slowly sheds the markers of her sovereign role as an Englishwoman and instead takes on a border identity between the cultures of the East and West. In order to keep Kate alive, Greyman instructs her to "pass as his wife—his sick wife, hidden as Zora had been, on some terraced roof, with Tara as her servant" while he adopts the guise of an Afghan horse-dealer (236). By agreeing to this arrangement, Kate essentially agrees to step into Zora's place and adopt the identity of an Indian woman. However, it is not enough to merely take on the role in name alone – she must "dress as well as play the part" (238). In order to survive the ravages of the Mutiny, Kate must surrender herself, mind and body, over to India. She dresses herself in the "billowy train and loose, soft, filmy veil" of a woman of Delhi and must wear the jewels of the deceased Zora (237). Initially, Kate is hesitant to adopt such a foreign role: "Kate, with sudden gravity, looked at the pile of native ornaments he emptied out on to the bed. Bracelets in gold and silver, anklets, odd little jeweled tassels..." (238). At first, she cannot get over how "odd" and "native" her newly assumed decorations seem: "they are very pretty... but I would rather not—unless it is really necessary" (238). Soon, however, Kate is overwhelmed with a strange desire to adopt her native disguise:

Kate felt the blood tingle to her face as she laid violent hands on the first ornament she touched. It happened to be a solid gold bangle... Kate felt a flush, half of resentment, half of shame... Had [Greyman] guessed the odd thrill

which the touch of that gold fetter gave her? [She was]
becoming interested despite herself (238-9)

When confronted with these relics of the Indian woman, Kate loses control over her faculties. Her blood tingles, her face flushes, and she feels an odd thrill as soon as she touches the gold bangle. Tellingly, the moment she comes in contact with this ornament of India, she begins to lose the marker of her Englishness – her whiteness. By simply laying a hand on the gold bangle, she flushes – an involuntary response that pollutes her white English face with color. The thrill she experiences in exploring her latent desire to assume such a native guise further weakens her English sensibilities.

This corruption of Kate’s whiteness only becomes more pronounced the longer she remains in Lucknow. Aware that, with the Sepoy rebels in the city, fair skin was a marker for certain death, Greyman “urged an immediate darkening of Kate’s hair and a faint staining of the face to suit the only part possible with her grey eyes—that of a fair Afghan” (239). The darkening of Kate’s hair and skin speaks to a recasting of her cultural and racial identity. She is no longer Kate Erlton, the English wife and mother. Instead, she has been pulled into the liminal space between races by fellow border-dweller James Greyman.

Significantly, Kate’s shedding of the *memsahib* title and her acceptance of a native disguise occurs in the liminal space of the rooftop apartment. Originally, Greyman entertained the idea of hiding her in one of the many rooms he rented in India; however, he recognized that Kate “had an imagination, and what woman with that could stand being left alone in the dark” (235). This darkness that Greyman recognizes is not simply an absence of light — a room located so close to the threat of the Mutiny would expose Kate more directly to the dark and dangerous skin of the Indian. For Kate, it would be

impossible to reconstruct her identity in an overwhelmingly Indian environment; being surrounded by the dark of the Indian world only cause her to further retreat from such an identity for herself. Instead, Greyman takes her to the rooftop apartment where she is allowed to oversee India and the Mutiny and yet be separated from it. Here Kate is at once isolated from the Mutiny and submerged in it, struggling to construct her own boundary space. Though Kate is outwardly remade into an Afghan woman, inwardly she struggles to maintain traces of her English identity. Greyman marvels at this attempt and comes to cherish the fact that “he could at any time climb out of all sight and sound of turmoil to a slip of sunlit roof where a woman waited for him with confidence and welcome in her eyes; with something obtrusively English” (245). Here, Kate becomes the iconic image of female domesticity that English soldiers carried in their hearts to battle against the rebel forces; Greyman finds an escape from the “sound of turmoil” of the Mutiny through the indescribable yet “obtrusively English” aspect that Kate represents. For her part, Kate found solace on the rooftop by “making her corner of the East as much like the West as she dare” (245-6). Ironically, her attempt to hold on to Englishness actually undermines her cultural identity. Since she cannot cultivate her cherished garden of English perennials, Kate maintains a library as she had before the Mutiny. However, her volumes “consisted of grammars and vocabularies from which Kate learned with a rapidity that surprised and interested her teacher [James Greyman]” (246). Though she first creates the library to cling to her notions of the West, the library actually serves to bring her closer to the East by educating her in the languages of India. Throughout the course of the novel, Kate determinately resisted such an education; while Alice Gissing, James Greyman, and even the child Sonny picked up at least some

knowledge of the Hindi language, Kate always shied away from the foreign tongue. In the rooftop apartment, however, Kate loses this resistance and begins to give her mind over to the ways of the Indian. In this liminal space, Kate cannot be truly English or Indian.

Kate is not the only English character to have her whiteness stained by Indian tints. After Sonny is taken away in the care of Alice's ayah, he is remade into an Indian child. When Kate is reunited with the once golden-haired English child, she balks at the ethnic transformation:

[Kate's] mind was busy with an adorable vision of white embroideries, golden curls, and kissable, dimpled milk and roses. So it was no wonder that she recoiled from the ragged shift and dark skin, the black close-cropped hair shaved horribly into a wide gangway from nape to forehead. 'O ayah!' she cried reproachfully, 'What have you done to Sonny *baba!*' For Sonny it was unmistakably, in the guise of a street urchin. (287)

Though Kate recognizes that the dark child is "unmistakably" the Sonny she knows and loves, she nevertheless recoils from the dyed dark skin. This disgust at the darkened Sonny soon causes Kate to toss aside all thought of safety so that she might see the child's hidden Englishness. After living in the Eastern apartment for so long, she longs for the companionship that only another English individual can provide:

The house would be a home indeed with his sweet 'Miffis Erlton' echoing through it. No! what the old Mai said was true. There would be danger in English prattle... He must be kept as safe as that other child over across the seas whose empty place this one had partly filled—that other child who in all these storms and stress was, thank Heaven! so safe. She must deny herself that pleasure, and be content with this *terribly-disfigured Sonny*. Then she wondered if the dye came off as hers did; so with a wet finger began trying the experiment on the child's cheek. A

little; but perhaps soap and warm water might—She gathered Sonny in her arms and went over to the cooking-place. And there, to her unreasoning delight, after a space, was a square inch or so of milk and roses... she should like to see the real Sonny just once! (289, my emphasis)

Kate fears that Sonny may be permanently “terribly-disfigured,” and begins to scrub away at the dye. Significantly, Kate is overcome with desire to cleanse Sonny of his native stains after she associates the child with her own son home in England.

Throughout the text, Sonny “partly filled” the place of Kate’s own child; he did the same for many of the mothers in Lucknow whose children were safe in England. With this in mind, the dyeing of Sonny speaks to an overall pollution of the children, the future of England, by Indian hands. In this scene, the notion of English identity is negotiated over the body of the child, Sonny. When untouched by the markers of the native, Sonny is considered a beautiful child; he possesses the “golden curls, and kissable, and dimpled milk and roses” of any ideal English infant. Once tainted with the ink of India, however, Kate, who is also dyed, can no longer view the boy in the same light and must furiously scrub away at what she regards as a form of pollution.

By cleansing away the Indian stains, Kate jeopardizes both Sonny’s safety and her own. Though Sonny had been sleeping in an opium daze, Kate’s scrubbing wakes the child:

It was a fascinating task and she forgot everything else, till, as she began work on the nose, what with the tickling and the tepid-bathing dispelling the opium drowsiness, Sonny awoke, and finding himself in strange arms began to scream horribly. And there she was, forgetful of caution amongst other things, kissing and cuddling the frightened child, asking him if he didn’t know her... She recognized her slip in a second; but it was too late. And hark! There were steps on the stair, and Sonny was prattling on in his

high, clear lisp... the sound was unmistakable; no native child was ever so ear-piercing, so wildly indignant. (290)

As soon as Kate reveals even a hint of Sonny's whiteness, his Indian identity is erased and he falls back into the habits of an English child. The second that Englishness invades the cultivated Eastern space, the illusion is broken and Kate and Sonny are susceptible to harm at the hand of the approaching Indian. In order to survive the Mutiny, the English are forced to permanently alter their cultural identities and slip into the stained skin of the Indian.

As the situation in Lucknow worsens, Kate submits herself more and more to the transformative influence of her native disguise. With Greyman injured and unable to return for Kate, the care of the Englishwoman falls into the hands of Tara. She knows that if Greyman returns to look for her, he will be in harm's way. Concerned for the Englishman's safety, Kate instructs Tara to further disguise her so that neither the Sepoy rebels nor Greyman will find her. With this danger in mind, Tara tells her to adopt the guise of a screened woman – a widow preparing for sati. Because Tara rejected this role for herself, she can't believe that a white Englishwoman would accept the position of a suttee woman. She goes so far as to try to dissuade Kate by pointing out the sacrifices that led the Indian woman to shy away from such a fate: “The *mem* will shave her head and put away her jewels! The *mem* will wear a widow's shroud and sweep the floor, saying she comes from Bengal to serve the saint?” (328). Though Tara expects this to be enough to keep Kate from becoming a sati-like figure, the Englishwoman surprises her:

‘I do not care, Tara, how it is done. Perhaps you may have a better plan. But we must prevent the master [Greyman] from finding me again. He has done too much for me as it

is; you now he has,' replied Kate, her eyes shining like stars with determination. 'I only want you to save him; that is all. You may take me away and kill me if you like; and if you won't help me to hide, I'll go out into the streets and let him kill me there. I will not have him risk his life for me again.' (329)

Though Greyman is not her husband, Kate nevertheless vows to kill herself if her life puts Greyman's in jeopardy. This willingness to sacrifice herself for Greyman's sake marks Kate as the ideal Hindu wife and a kind of sati figure. This realization ignites a spark of jealousy in Tara:

Would the *mem* really be *suttee*? she asked herself again and again. Would she do so much for the master? Would she—would she really shave her head?... Besides, she had no right to do it! The *mems* were never *suttee*. They married again many times. And this *mem* was married to someone else. No! she would never shave her head for a strange man. She might take off her jewels, she might even sweep the floor. But shave her head? never! But supposing she did? (329)

Tara views Kate's willingness to become *suttee* as an affront and a challenge to her sense of purity and duty to her religion and caste. As a Rajpoot of the highest class, Tara was expected to burn after her fiancé's death. When she refused, she brought dishonor onto her family and was subsequently cast out of their household. Even her own twin brother, Soma, "would not for worlds have touched the hand which had lain in his from the beginning of all things. It was unclean now" (31). Out of fear and pride and vanity, Tara adamantly refused to self-immolate. When Kate takes up the knife to cut her own hair, Tara becomes frantic, unable to believe that an Englishwoman might usurp her Hindu role:

'She will never cut it off!' said Tara to herself as she went for the razor. No woman would ever shave her head willingly. Why! when she had had it done for the first

time, she had screamed and fought. Her mother-in-law had held her hands, and—

She paused at the door as she re-entered, paralyzed by what she saw. Kate had found the knife Tara used for her limited cooking, and, seated on the ground cheerfully, was already surrounded by rippling hair which she had cut off by clubbing it in her hand and sawing away as a groom does at a horse's tail.

Tara's cry made her pause. The next moment the Rajpootni had snatched the knife from her and flung it one way, the razor another, and stood before her with blazing eyes and heaving breast.

'It is foolishness!' she said fiercely. 'The *mems* cannot be *suttee*. I will not have it.' (330)

When confronted with the ritual of sati, Tara shies away: she refuses to cut her hair and has to be held down in order to undergo procedure. For Tara, sati exists as both a holy sacrament and humiliating sacrifice. In the end, she balks at her religious and marital duties and refuses to go through with committing sati. When Tara witnesses Kate shearing her own hair in the name of a man to whom she isn't even married, Tara begins to question her own purity. In the midst of her crisis of self, she prays to Swâmi Sri Anunda for guidance: "I have told Sri Anunda... And he is as God... he says the *mem* could not have been *suttee*, so that foolishness is well over" (331). Her mind at ease, Tara sends Kate to the holy garden of Sri Anunda for protection. For fifteen days, Kate must live as a Hindi ascetic under a vow of silence and solitude. In this garden of Indian worship, Kate Erlton is remade. As explored in Shelley Saguaro's *Garden Plots*, gardens are often the locations of cultural and racial negotiations; they reflect such issues as "myth, cultural specificity, historical context, nation, topography, class, race, religion [and] gender. From gardens of the most utilitarian aspect (food for survival) to those of the most decorative and ostentatious aspect, gardens are subject to, and subjects of, the discourses of history, aesthetics and ideology" (1). By leaving her artificial though

solidly English garden and entering into Sri Anunda's sacred garden, Kate finally casts aside her cult of English annuals and submerges herself into India's natural space. If her English garden is the product of her attempt to cultivate an Edenic space, the garden of Sri Anunda, a figure said to be "as God" to the Hindu Tara, serves as a kind of divine Hindu space. In this garden of Eastern religion, Kate "[loses] her grip on this world without gaining, without even desiring a hold on the next. She was learning a strange new fellowship with the dream of which she was a part, because it would soon be past; because the trees, the flowers, the birds, the beasts, were mortal as herself" (339). In Sri Anunda's garden, Kate begins to divest herself of the Christian mentality that teaches that man was given "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on earth."¹⁴ Instead, the Englishwoman adopts a more Eastern ideology and begins to view herself equal to the creatures that inhabit the garden with her. In this moment of enlightenment, Sri Anunda appears before her:

It was neither tall nor short, dark nor fair, and it was wrapped from knee to shoulder in a dazzling white cloth draped like a Greek chiton, which showed the thin yet not emaciated curves of the limbs, and the poise of the long throat bare... But the eyes! Kate felt a strange shock, as they brought back to her the innocent dignity Raphael gave to his San-Sistine Bambino; for this was Sri Anunda—it could be no one else... 'The lesson is learnt, sister,' he said softly. 'Go in peace and have no fear.' (339)

Somehow, Sri Anunda defies categorization; he is "neither tall nor short, dark nor fair." By escaping racial classification, Sri Anunda slips into a liminal space between race and religion. True, he is a Hindu Swâmi; however, in Kate's eyes, he is also linked to the

¹⁴ Genesis 1:26

Christian tradition through his likeness to Raphael's San-Sistine Bambino. The appearance of Sri Anunda in the garden marks Kate's transition from the *memsahib* into an honorable and understanding Anglo-Indian.

As suggested by the novel's title, this negotiation of Christianity and Hinduism is contained not only within Sri Anunda's garden, but is also central to the novel as a whole. The phrase "on the face of the waters" is taken directly from the first chapter of Genesis.¹⁵ With this reference in mind, "the whole sense of creation and authority... seems an important key to understanding Steel's discourse on civilization in the colonial context" (Mallonee 40). Though the novel's title is a clear allusion to Genesis, this "authority" is not necessarily a wholly Christian one. Just as the East remakes the Christian Kate, the words of Genesis are reinterpreted within a Hindu context. At the novel's conclusion, Kate's English friend Charles Morecombe wonders over the cause of the Mutiny in a letter to the Englishwoman: "I asked a native yesterday if he could explain [the Mutiny], but he only shook his head and said the Lord had sent a 'breath into the land'" (391). In Steel's own words when discussing the novel's title: "I have chosen [the title] because when you ask an uneducated native of India why the Great Rebellion came to pass, he will, in nine cases out of ten, reply, 'God knows! He sent a Breath into the World.' From this to a Spirit moving on the face of the Waters is not far" (9). Here Hindu lips paraphrase the words of Genesis, which are then reinterpreted by the English woman writer. The authority thought responsible for the Mutiny cannot be named, and authority itself falls into the liminal space between race and religion. The

¹⁵ Genesis 1:2, "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."

Englishwoman, like the novel's title, is recast through a Hindu lens – which is then responded to through Steel's enlightened, albeit Western, perspective. Just as Sri Anunda's appearance before Kate marks her departure from the Christian faith, Steel's interpretation of novel's title – widely thought to only represent the Western Judeo-Christian tradition – serves to re-contextualize the novel as a whole. This rethinking of the title in the last pages of the text serves to dispel preconceived notions of both religious and imperial authority.

The appearance of Sri Anunda before Kate only further incites Tara's jealousy. When she learns of the meeting between the Englishwoman and the Swâmi, Tara recognizes that a memsahib has surpassed her Hindu virtues. “‘Sri Anunda! hath he been here?’ Tara paused, sniffed, and once more those dark eyes met the light ones with fierce jealousy. ‘He hath given thee henna-blossom? I smell it; and he gives it to none but those who—So the Swâmi's lesson is learnt—and the disciple can go in peace!’” (342). Though Tara recognizes that Kate has been distinguished as a disciple of Sri Anunda, she cannot accept this fact and resents Kate for it, as demonstrated by her repeated use of the title “*mem*” when speaking to Kate: “‘The *mem* will sleep among her own tonight; Sri Anunda hath said it... The *mem* is Sri Anunda's disciple. For the rest, I will let the *mem* out through the little river gate... The *mem* must wait here,’” and so on (342-3). Kate's usurpation of Tara's role as ideal Hindu woman is furthered when she steps into the position of caregiver for James Greyman. For years, Tara served as housekeeper, servant, and companion for Greyman. Though their relationship never extended to the realm of the romantic or sexual, Tara harbored a deep affection for her English master. When he returns to her care injured and sick, Tara does her best to revive his spirits.

Unfortunately, her efforts prove futile and she seeks Kate's aid. Though Tara tries to convince herself that she has cared for Greyman as well as anyone, when she sees the two English characters together, Tara recognizes that her role has once again been eclipsed by the presence of Kate: the Englishwoman succeeds in reviving Greyman where Tara could not.

Kate, wearied out, had fallen asleep crouched up on the stool, her head resting on the pillow, her arm flung over the bed to keep that touch on his hand which seemed to bring him rest. Tara, once more in her widow's dress, looked down on them silently, then threw her bare arms upwards. So for a second she stood, a white-shrouded appealing figure against that dark shadow of the dome which blocked the paling eastern sky. Then stooping, her long, lissome fingers busied themselves stealthily with the thin gold chain about the sick man's neck; for there was something in the locket attached to it which was hers by right now. Hers, if she could have nothing else for she was *suttee—suttee!*
(381)

Unable to act as wife to Greyman, Tara instead takes up the role that she denied herself twelve years prior—she will burn and become suttee. Overcome with grief and jealousy, Tara seizes this moment to complete the aborted sati ritual of her past. The Indian woman takes to the streets in search of one of the “many wanton fires in Delhi” that had ignited since the English reclaimed the city (381). Tara climbs to the roof of a one of the blazing buildings and claims her right of self-immolation:

That canopy of smoke, those licking tongues of flame, had given the last touch to Tara's unstable mind. She had crept up and up, blindly, and was now on her knees in that bare room set round with her one scrap of culture, ransacking an old basket for something which had not seen the light for years—her scarlet, tinsel-set wedding dress. Her hands were trembling, her wild eyes blazed like fires themselves... So, outlined against the first sun ray she stood, her shrill chanting voice rising above the roar and rush of the flames. *'Oh! Guardians eight, of this world and*

the next. Sun, Moon, and Air, Earth, Ether, Water, and my own poor soul bear witness! Oh! Lord of death, bear witness that I come. Day, Night, and Twilight, say I am suttee.'

There was a louder roar, a sudden leaping of the flames, and the turret sank inwardly. But the chanting voice could be heard for a second in the increasing silence which followed. (382)

Supplanted in her role of caregiver by an Englishwoman, Tara takes to the rooftop so that she may burn as a saint. Since Kate has robbed her of her wife-like position by reviving Greyman and caused her to question her spirituality through her time in Sri Anunda's garden, Tara seeks out the last facet of her racial identity that Kate cannot touch: her scarlet wedding dress, the "one scrap of culture" Tara has left. Significantly, Tara's immolation occurs *because* of English influence. Without Kate's presence in Tara's life, the Indian woman would have never felt that her cultural identity was threatened and would never have ascended the burning building. Though at first it seems as if Tara is saved from the ritual self-immolation by English hands in the form of Greyman's intervention, in the end the Englishman only manages to delay the inevitable. It is the presence of the English in India that leads Tara to burn herself in a fire literally sparked by the Anglo-Indian conflict. With Tara's death, Steel dispels the idea that the English presence in India will somehow curb the practice of sati. As a supporter of Indian women's rights and one of the few sympathetic voices of mutiny fiction, Steel's depiction of the sati woman consumed in the fires of the Anglo-Indian conflict calls into question the prevailing notion that the English presence meant salvation from sati for the women of India. For Steel, the legitimacy of the English presence in India burns away with Tara.

As evidenced by the Tara-Kate rivalry, the Anglo-Indian relationship is marked by contamination on both sides. Just as Kate must compromise her Western ideology in

order to survive the Mutiny, Tara's exposure to the Englishwoman leads her to question her own racial identity as never before. In order to prove that she is still a virtuous Indian woman and that her racial identity is still intact, Tara must commit the ultimate act of female sacrifice in her culture by surrendering herself to the ritual sacrifice she had so narrowly escaped twelve years prior. Kate, however, cannot wholly realign herself with an English identity; the events of the Mutiny have been too altering and, particularly after her experience in Sri Anunda's garden, she cannot fully reclaim her previous life as an Englishwoman. However, her rescue from the rooftop apartment and reestablishment within the English domestic space prevents the completion of her transformation from *memsahib* into Hindu disciple. In this way, Kate comes to dwell in the liminal space between races and is neither at home in England nor in India. It is for this reason that she does not return to England at the novel's close. After Kate's husband Herbert dies, Kate and Greyman make a home together in Scotland (389). Just as Cyril Brandon of *Seeta* must carry his Indian experiences with him into his post-Mutiny life – as seen through his cultivation of a native space in the form of his “den” – Kate and Greyman cannot fully erase the scars of the Mutiny and subsequently cannot completely return to their English lives. For both Steel and Taylor, white hands will never be able to cleanse themselves of the stains of India or the blood spilt in the Mutiny.

The events and issues of the Mutiny and Anglo-Indian relations as a whole are not contained within the genre of Mutiny Fiction. The presence of India and the spectacle of sati seem to reverberate throughout Victorian fiction both before and after the Mutiny. Probably the most canonical text that contains traces of the Indian is *Jane Eyre*, a text written a decade prior to the outbreak of the Mutiny. As Joyce Zonana argues, “the

groundwork establishing India as a locale for gendered oriental despotism [is] laid early in the novel” (613). Not only does the threat of being “grilled alive in Calcutta” linger in Jane’s mind at the thought of actually moving to India, but the burning of the madwoman, Bertha Mason, serves as a nod to Indian widow-burning (Brontë 441). After Jane and Rochester agree to marry, Jane begins to take notice of his “pagan” tendencies (301). When Rochester sings a song to her in which a woman vows “to live—to die” with her beloved, Jane seizes on the phrase and declares that she “had no intention of dying” with Rochester: “I had as good a right to die when my time came as he had: but I should bide that time, and not be hurried away in a suttee” (301). Jane wholly resists the Eastern lure of her husband-to-be. She notes “He smiled; and I thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems to be enriched” (297). However, rather than being swept up as one of his “harem inmates,” Jane sets herself in opposition to his Oriental power. When Rochester jokingly asks what she will do while he is “bargaining for so many tons of flesh and such an assortment of black eyes,” Jane sharply responds: “I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved—your harem inmates among the rest. I’ll get admitted there, and I’ll stir up mutiny” (297). While Jane fiercely defends her Christian sensibilities and rights as an independent Englishwoman, and thus escapes the flames of suttee, Rochester’s first wife Bertha, the West Indian madwoman, does not. Already touched from birth with the stains of Oriental Otherness, Bertha cannot claim independence from Rochester and consequently grows mad and is shut up in the manor’s attic. During one of her nighttime strolls, the mad Creole woman sets fire to Thornfield and then jumps to her death:

And then they called out to him that she [Bertha Mason] was on the roof; where she was standing, waving her arms, above the battlements, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off... She was a big woman, and had long black hair: we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood. (377)

Bertha's death is linked to *suttee* as it "presents us with the image of a deranged woman with arms outstretched against the burning sky in a spectacle of death" (Sharpe 104).

While Jane resists the Eastern touch of Rochester and refuses to become the slave to his sultan, Bertha is traded away into marriage by her family and loses control of both her identity and her mind. This idea that Bertha self-immolates during one of her violent, madness-induced episodes is in keeping with the ideal of *sati*; as Sharpe points out, "the description of her burning differs little from the orthodox Hindu position, which claims that, at the point of death, the good widow is possessed by *sat*, a trancelike state" (104). While Bertha's life is relegated to that of Rochester's exotic slave, her death is constructed as that of a burning Hindu widow.

Though *Jane Eyre* was written ten years before the events of the Mutiny and never depicts the landscape of India, the anxiety of the East is nonetheless present in the text. The same can be said for Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. When the first installment of the novel appeared in December of 1860, England was still reeling from the events of the Mutiny. As Shanyn Fiske so aptly puts it, "In light of this fact and considering Dickens' avid interest in Indian culture and affairs, it is perhaps not coincidental that a central figure in his 1860 novel engulfs herself in a deadly shroud of fire while dressed in her bridal gown or that the site of this climactic immolation bears the name Satis House" (32). Though her wedding never takes place, in order to maintain her illusion of being a devoted wife, Miss Havisham plays the part of a widow; she

forsakes both food and companionship – cultivating an image of perpetual mourning indicative of the Hindu widow. “Staging a scene of mourning on the set of an aborted marriage, the sati of Dicken’s novel inhabits a space where stopped clocks preserve its occupant in a moment between real and ritual death, fixed upon the moldering remains of a wedding feast” (40). In the moments before her immolation, Miss Havisham acts out the sati woman’s ceremonial pre-death march around her husband’s funeral pyre: ““Come, come, come! Walk me, walk me!”” she commands Pip who “made out from this, that the work [he] had to do, was walk Miss Havisham round and round the room” (Dickens 113). With the burning of Miss Havisham, Dickens transposes Indian imagery onto an English setting and questions the domestic ideals of both the East and West.

Of course, the resonances of both the Mutiny and sati extend far beyond either the canonical *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* or the more obscure Mutiny texts, *Seeta* and *On the Face of the Waters*. These Eastern influences can be traced throughout Victorian fiction, beyond the Edwardian, and into the twentieth century. Though my analysis centers around two Mutiny texts, I would further my research by examining how English anxieties surrounding the East carry into more modern texts by looking at novels such as Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *Set in Authority* (1906), E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924), and Paul Scott’s *The Raj Quartet* (1966), in all of which the issue of sati is still present – for example, Scott’s fiction depicts the attempted burning of an English infant by a *memsahib*. As demonstrated by English fiction throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, the imperial-colonial project exposed the English to the culturally contaminating but transformative influence of the East. The tension between trying to save the Indians from themselves through the abolition of sati and being captivated by the

spectacle of the burning woman speaks to this transformation. Like Kate Erlton when presented with the ornaments of the Indian woman, English society as a whole was simultaneously thrilled and threatened by the erotics of the East. By claiming dominion over the East, English society was paradoxically opened to a dilution of Englishness. Just as Kate must dye her skin, the West begins to be imbued with the markers of the East and starts to see through the tinted lens of the exoticized Indian Other.

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