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In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak suggests that a British colonial view of the relationship between colonizer and colonized might be summarized in the sentence 'White men are saving brown women from brown men'. How far does this sentence reflect the representations of British dealings with India in the texts you have studied? Is there an alternative sentence that might, in your view, provide a more accurate account of these texts?

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In her influential essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Gayatri Spivak identifies in early nineteenth century discourse on *sati* the Hindu practice of widow self-immolation, a site for analysing the colonizer-colonized relationship. In response to the British interdiction and eventual abolition of *sati* in 1829, she concludes that this may be summarised as 'white men are saving brown women from brown men'.[1] Spivak's assessment may equally be applied to Phillip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*, which portrays Indian 'thugs' as religiously-motivated criminal bandits who committed ritual murder by strangulation. Thuggee was a practice similarly subject to colonial intervention, culminating in a British campaign to eradicate it the 1830s and 1840s.[2] Spivak's recognition of literary texts as a site of 'epistemic violence' denotes that wider colonial ideologies are contained within discourse on contentious issues such as *sati* and thuggee.[3] In an age which evaluated the treatment of women as an index of civilisation, these issues epitomised the abhorrent conduct which provided evidence for the degeneracy of Indian society and justified the presence of 'white men' as the protectors of both women and India as a nation. This initial sentence therefore contains diverse implications for consideration. Spivak continues by asserting that Western representations of India elide the subjectivity and agency of the subaltern colonized populace.[4] However, the diverse nature, form, and complexity of representations of *sati* and Meadows Taylor's novel prevent us from applying this sentiment monolithically, as narrative intricacies have the capacity to subvert the explicit ideologies presented within a text. Upon examination, this essay will establish how the terms of 'white men' and 'brown men' and their relations to 'brown women' are blurred, and distinctions offered by the sentence 'white men are saving brown women from brown men' are therefore far from absolute.

The homogeneity of 'brown men' is key, as the ideology upon which Spivak's sentence is formulated assumes the male population of India are identically implicit in practices which repress their female counterparts. Thuggee is emphasised as a hereditary cult; Ameer Ali expresses 'I desire nothing but to become a Thug and follow you, my father' and

[1] G. C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd edn., ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 33.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Máire ní Fhlathúin, '"That solitary Englishman": W. H. Sleeman and the biography of British India', *Victorian Review,* 27.1: 69-85 (p. 69).
[4] Spivak, p. 31.

frequently refers to the 'fraternity', highlighting that thuggee is bred within the male familial line, suggesting immoral practices are innate to Indian blood.[5] The inherent brutality of Indian men is found in accounts of *sati* which include the presence of murderous, male crowds. D. L. R.'s poem emphasises the male instigating force when 'fraternal hands bestow' the flame with which the woman is lit.[6] Just as the instigators are male, so are the spectators, as Landon documents 'every gazer holds *his* breath' [italics mine].[7] In these representations of *sati* the native population are a cruel and indiscriminate mass: a 'ruthless throng' who 'their willing aid supply', indicating not only an involvement but active endorsement of *sati*.[8] Sigourney's poem asserts native approval in 'the glad murmur of the crowd' escalating to a 'wild demoniac shout' in which the perceived inhumanity of the practice is projected onto the crowd who become inhuman themselves.[9] The same savagery is echoed in 'The Rajah's Obsequies', as the metaphor 'people throng, like clust'ring bees / Swarming around the almond trees' depicts the crowd as angry insects, denoting their animalistic brutality and affirming their voracity for *sati*.[10] 'Brown men' are therefore represented as uniform in their subjection of 'brown women', justifying the need for 'white men' to intervene.

The brutality of 'brown men' is confirmed as religious leaders, those traditionally moral, are implicit in and often integral to *sati*. In Sigourney's poem 'infuriate priests' juxtapose 'kind Nature' as they condemn a mother to her death, leaving her baby to 'hopeless orphanage'.[11] Lata Mani states 'colonial intervention on *Sati* is most frequently represented as the response of a Western, Christian sensibility'.[12] In its willingness to separate mother and child, *sati* is informed by a religion which supersedes laws of nature and human rights, highlighting the representation of Hinduism as an unethical form of religious 'Other' to Christianity, justifying the intervention of 'White men ***with white religion*** to save brown women from brown men.' However, as Kate Teltscher points out, by depicting Priests and Brahmins as 'self-interested instigators' of *sati*, attention is deflected away from the widow herself.[13] Representations of *sati* become analogous with the immorality of Indian religion rather than the subjection of women, highlighting the diverse dimensions to the ideologies which underlie Spivak's assessment.

Confessions of a Thug exhibits a similar preoccupation with Indian religion; as Ali declares, 'thuggee is one of the means by which Allah works out his own ends' and believes that the uniting of Hindu and Muslim as 'brothers' in the profession is a sign of its divine status.[14] The narrator, in contrast, emphasises it 'strange that Hindoo and Moslem…should join with one accord in the superstition from which this horrible trade has arisen', defining thuggee as a practice based on erroneous ideas of religion debased to 'superstition.' Furthermore, he states thugs are 'the most united…consequently the most dangerous and destructive', inverting the idea of their unity as divine, instead declaring it damaging.[15] The fact that this union is emphasised as rare implies that violent practices are the only way Indians may achieve a cultural unity themselves. Sleeman's essay 'A Suttee on the Nerbudda' echoes this as the population of Benares is 'so prone to popular insurrections or risings en

[5] Philip Meadows Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, 1839, ed. Patrick Brantlinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 36.
[6] D. L. R. [David Lester Richardson], 'The Suttee', *Bengal Hurkaru*, November 16, 1829.
[7] L. E. L. [Letitia Elizabeth Landon], 'A Suttee', *The Zenana and minor poems*, ed. Emma Roberts (London, 1839).
[8] D. L. R., 'The Sutee'
[9] L. H. Sigourney, 'The Sutee', *Poems* (Boston, 1827).
[10] Emma Roberts, 'The Rajah's Obsequies', *Oriental Scenes, Dramatic Sketches And Tales, With Other Poems* (Calcutta, 1830).
[11] Sigourney, 'The Suttee'.
[12] Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (London: University of California Press, 1998), p. 15.
[13] Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed — European and British Writing on India 1600-1800* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 55.
[14] Meadows Taylor, p. 46.
[15] Ibid., p. 6.

masse very like them'.[16] In these texts 'brown men' can only unite in an immoral cause, whether religiously or socially motivated. The responsibility therefore falls on the 'white man' to unite the population through peaceful means, as purported in Sleeman's story, in which the English magistrate talks the crowd out of the sacrifice of a widow. Representations of inhumane forms of religion and violent uprisings suggest a moral degeneracy inherent in the native Indian population, and as a consequence 'white men are saving brown women ***and brown men*** from brown men.'

Within the terms of Spivak's sentence then, it may be established that 'brown men' are represented as religiously immoral and socially corrupt, and 'white men' are required to unify, civilise and educate the population. The terms and motives of the "white man" may therefore be questioned as his role is displaced from 'saving brown women' to 'reforming brown men'. This is intrinsically linked to the changing motives of the East India Company in the early nineteenth century from that of a mercantile, commercial presence to an administrative authority which aimed to enlarge its territory and govern the indigenous population. In *Orientalism,* Edward Said makes explicit the idea that knowledge of the Orient facilitates Western dominance of it.[17] In *Confessions of a Thug* the narrator demonstrates an exhaustive knowledge of Indian custom and 'pledge(s) the experience of fifteen years' residence in India, and a constant and intimate association with its inhabitants'.[18] W. H. Sleeman similarly frequently glosses language for his Western audience as when he states, 'the dhaja, or course red turban' and demonstrates knowledge of Indian custom: 'broke her bracelets in pieces, by which she became dead in law, and for ever excluded from caste'.[19] In becoming intimate with the practices and values of the society he places himself in an appropriate position to control them, as he tells the widow, 'my object and duty is to save and preserve'.[20] Though Sleeman seems sympathetic to her case, and eventually allows her to burn herself, he ultimately regulates the act. Stephen Morton states that 'rather than defending the woman's agency, the British colonial administration used the body of the widow as an ideological battleground for colonial power'.[21] By claiming to 'save brown women', the 'white man' in fact exercises colonial control over them. 'Brown women' are therefore merely incidental within these texts, marginal to wider colonial project which aimed to dominate India.

In the second half of Sleeman's essay, his conversation with a 'native gentleman' takes a question and answer form, in which the Indian man is obliged to answer to the authority, the passive participant demonstrating his inferior position as the colonial subject. *Confessions of a Thug* is also filtered through the discourse of Western dominance. Michel Foucault identifies the confession as intricately bound up with power relations; 'the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks…but in the one who listens and says nothing'.[22] By presenting his novel in the form of a confession, Meadows Taylor asserts British superiority by inviting the Western reader to evaluate thuggee, handing them authority and rendering Ameer Ali the passive interlocutor and inferior colonial subject.[23] The novel is also lent authority by its form, as 'Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals…for the production of truth'.[24] As Ameer testifies, 'I have told all, nor concealed from you one thought, one feeling, much less any act', the thug testifies to the

[16] William Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, rev. and ann. Vincent A Smith (Karachi: OUP, 1915), p. 20.
[17] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1977. (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 6.
[18] Meadows Taylor, p. 13.
[19] Sleeman, p. 20.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 63.
[22] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol 1* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 61-62.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

accuracy of the account and is therefore implicit in the imperialist project as he authenticates the truthfulness of colonial knowledge presented. The Western reader is assured of the barbarism of the Indian populace by one of their own as Ali becomes a native informant.[25] Representations of *sati* and thuggee place emphasis on the deplorable actions of Hindu men and 'brown women' are consigned to the peripheries of the text, as implements through which to vindicate the presence of 'white men'. Spivak's argument can be reformulated as 'white men ***using the mistreatment of*** brown women ***as justification for the control of*** brown men.'

However, Dennis Porter criticises the notion of a unified Western discourse. Through narrative oscillation and 'textual dissonances' in *Confessions of a Thug*, Ameer Ali may arise as a 'counter-hegemonic voice' to subvert the ideologies of Western dominance the novel explicitly seeks to represent.[26] In a direct confrontation between Sahib and Thug, Ali asks 'Have I not ever been a kind husband and a faithful friend? Did I not love my children and wife while He who is above spared them to me?'[27] As his unfaltering questioning continues the power relations of the confession are inverted; Ali becomes the active negotiator and the narrator silenced. Further to this the narrative authority in undermined as the Sahib declares 'no remorse seems to possess their souls', yet Ameer Ali frequently expresses guilt, causing a reader to question the narrator's judgement and the colonial bias which belies it.[28] As Ali relates the realisation that he has killed his sister he appeals to the reader to embody his pain, beginning 'could you but know my sufferings' and continuing in an evocative display of guilt.[29] As the reader embodies and identifies with Ali, colonial hierarchies are disregarded as his subjectivity is foregrounded and the reader becomes implicit within the challenge posed to traditional ideologies.

Similarly, Javed Majeed highlights the 'polyglot density' of the novel as it records multiple native registers and idioms foregrounding the cultural heterogeneity of India.[30] The inherent Indian barbarism first explored in this essay is destabilised as Ameer Ali is distinguished from other 'brown men' and their deplorable treatment of women. In contrast to the brutal pillaging carried out by the Pindarees, Ali asserts 'I could never bear the sight of wanton cruelty' and in a confrontation with Ghuffor Khan 'vainly endeavoured to induce him to give up the girl and let her go'.[31] As he criticises the horrific treatment of women he is aligned in sympathy with the reader. The distinction is further complicated as Ali's interactions with women are often virtuous occasions. He rescues both Zora and Azima from circumstances in which they are mistreated and declares of Azima, 'I could not leave so lovely a creature to the rude treatment she would experience from him to whom she was united', confirming his difference to other 'brown men' and taking responsibility for the salvation of 'brown women' upon himself, displacing the role of the 'white man' in Spivak's sentence.[32] At a time of colonial expansion, *Confessions of a Thug* only minimally registers a European presence in India, an absence which leads the reader to conclude '***brown men*** are saving brown women from brown men.'

However, questions of subaltern agency are still deeply imbedded in the material conditions of production and transmission of the novel. As Finkelstein states, 'Ameer Ali possesses the Indian equivalent of the manly qualities which distinguish the English hero of a

[25] Meadows Taylor, p. 550.
[26] Dennis Porter, 'Orientalism and its Problems', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993), pp. 153-54.
[27] Meadows Taylor, p. 263.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., p. 530.
[30] Javed Majeed, 'Meadows Taylors Confessions of a Thug: The Anglo-Indian novel as a genre in the Making', in *Writing India, 1757-1990: The Literature of British India*, ed. B. J. Moore-Gilbert (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 94.
[31] Meadows Taylor, pp. 363-64.
[32] Ibid., pp. 227.

typical Victorian novel'; he highlights Meadows Taylor's motives in depicting Ameer Ali as the 'hero' in order to ensure commercial success with his Western audience.[33] It may therefore be argued that Ali is merely ventriloquized through a Western tradition and though occasionally aligned in sympathy with the reader, as he kills his sister Ameer Ali's inhumanity is reinstated, and he is doubly distanced as the colonial 'Other'. His role as the 'saviour' of women is juxtaposed in his encounter with Shurfun, in which he justifies her death, asserting that 'it was her fate…her love for me was wicked and without shame', reaffirming his belief in a corrupt religious fatalism and demonstrating his subjection of women, confirming he is an example of 'brown men' from which 'brown women' need saving.[34]

Though colonial texts can be readily established as an ideologically inflected site for analysis, most accounts of *sati* and thuggee studied are by male authors, politicians and missionaries specifically involved in the administration of British India and therefore arguably unavoidably filtered through a political discourse. Jeanette Herman argues that 'women's writing on *sati* in this period has largely been ignored'.[35] Through examination of representations of women on an individual level, especially in women's writing, an alternate discourse is exposed. Contrary to Spivak's conclusion that 'white women…have not produced an alternative understanding', the complex representations provided both *by* Englishwomen and of Indian women go beyond divisions of race to establish identification through gender and imbue the subaltern women with a voice.[36]

In her reading of Mainwaring's *The Suttee,* Herman advocates a separation of public legislative discoursal sphere from the domestic and uses this as a platform to interpret *sati* within woman's writing, relating the ultimate fidelity of the Hindu widow to English ideals of devotion in marriage. The same circumscription of English femininity is found in Landon's 'A Suttee' as *sati* is compared to the Western marriage rite in the declaration 'She is a Bride!' and the 'band of gold' which adorns her ankle is a metaphorical wedding ring. The widow is depicted as the epitome of femininity; her 'small white feet' align her with European romantic ideals.[37] *Confessions of a Thug* similarly frequently implements highly visual imagery to invoke visions of beauty as appealing to the Western reader as to the Indian protagonist. In his depiction of Zora, Ali describes 'the colour of her scarf round her head, in contrast with her complexion made her appear fair', aligning her with the 'pale' beauty of European women. Just as Landon's widow is adorned in 'chains and bright stones', Ali expresses the wish to provide for his daughters' marriage 'clothes…of the best and richest material….jewels many and of value'.[38] Women are visual objects for the male voyeur to possess and treasure. Nussbaum argues that in depicting women whose 'bodies visibly display the world's wealth disregards the unequal balance of power between the colonized and the colonizer'.[39] The distinction between 'white' and 'brown' breaks down as women become sites for the connection of colonised-coloniser through a shared the interest in jewels and visual opulence. Association of Indian women with European femininity, though unintentional within Meadow Taylor's novel, draws an understanding of the inferior social position shared by all women. It becomes apparent that no woman is equal to the 'white man' and they are placed beyond the reaches of Spivak's sentence as '***white women and brown women need saving from men.***'

[33] David Finkelstein, *A Study of the Works of Philip Meadows Taylor*, PHD Thesis (University of Edinburgh, 1990), p. 54.
[34] Meadows Taylor, p. 317.
[35] Jeanette Herman, 'Men and Women of Feeling: Conventions of Sensibility and Sentimentality in the saati Debate and Mainwaring's *the Suttee*', in *Comparative Literature Studies*, 42.2 (2005), p. 225.
[36] Spivak, p. 33.
[37] Landon, 'A Suttee'.
[38] Meadows Taylor, p. 189.
[39] Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality and Empire in Eighteenth-Century Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995), p. 178.

Whereas 'A Suttee' and *Confessions of a Thug* implicitly draw connections between English and Indian women, Emma Roberts' poem explicitly criticises the patriarchal ideologies which repress them both. Nussbaum states that 'while the stories of the Indian woman and the Englishwoman may not be coequal or possess an identity, they are complexly bound together within systems of oppression'.[40] Within 'The Rajah's Obsequies' Roberts destabilises Mani's assertion that '[w]omen are represented in two mutually exclusive ways; as heroines…or else as pathetic victims' by inviting the reader into a direct comparison of two widows.[41] The first is seemingly willing as she states that 'I claim the privilege divine / which makes thee more ever mine!'; however, her conviction and agency is undermined as she is 'the youngest', implying naivety, whilst her 'placid eyes' suggest a drugged, deluded state. In comparison the second widow is literally given a voice, as she is directly quoted. Evading Mani's polemical argument, she is neither 'heroine' nor 'pathetic victim'; as she declares, 'Better it is to die, than inly pine', asserting agency in her choice to die as the preferred alternative to a 'loathed existence'.[42] The recognition of her lack of viable alternatives acknowledges the complicated subjectivity of the woman who enacts *sati*, recognising her social limitations and the plurality of factors which have resulted in her death. She explicitly laments the patriarchal oppression which has caused her death, stating 'it is because these hands / are all too weak to break my sex's bands'.[43] In comparing the two women, the reader comes to sympathise with the stronger, eloquent second widow, and therefore the objection to *sati* is displaced from 'brown men' to 'all men' and we may reformulate Spivak's assessment into '***brown women saving themselves from men***.'

Though Spivak's sentence goes some way to explore the coloniser-colonised relationship it is, as she herself admits, just 'one among many displacements'.[44] Accounts of *sati* and thuggee initially perpetuate colonial ideologies which depict 'brown men' as a brutal, oppressive force upon 'brown women' in juxtaposition to the benevolent, Christian 'white men' needed to save them. However, the diverse nature of these representations destabilise the terms upon which Spivak's sentence is predicated. Through interrogation of narrative intricacies and consideration of the contexts of production and transmission of these texts, a counter-hegemonic voice emerges and a space can be maintained for the subaltern in her 'precarious Subject-ivity' to tell us she does not need 'saving' at all.[45]

[40] Nussbaum, p. 191.
[41] Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 162.
[42] Roberts, 'The Rajah's Obsequies'.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Spivak, p. 33.
[45] Ibid.

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