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"Gender Trouble" in the New Hindi Novel: The Ambiguous Writings on Womanhood in K. B. Vaid's *Līlā* and Mridula Garg's *Kaṭhgulāb*

Anne Castaing

Some recent studies[1] bear witness to the paradoxes and the ambiguities which lie in the reception and the interpretation of Women and Gender studies in South Asia, where the issues of "Indianness" and intellectual "colonialism" are still intensively discussed. Evidence of this is found in the extremely contradictory reactions generated by Gayatri Spivak's famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), where the issue of female agency is questioned as reproducing the coloniser's discursive model, thus annihilating the empowerment of women. By underlining the various aspects of colonial oppression carried out by the collusion of "knowledge" and "power," Gayatri Spivak indeed demonstrates that in the colonisers' discourses and practices, women's condition has been a privileged field for confirming the inferiority of the "Orientals," of their barbarian practices and archaic traditions. This interpretation thus aims at justifying colonisation as a "mission of salvation": "White men are saving brown women from brown men," Spivak ironically writes (33). She thus proposes a critical reading of the abolition, by the colonial rulers, of the Sati (1829), the act of self-immolation by widows on their husband's funeral pyre, which, according to Spivak, was not only amplified but also *interpreted* by the British rulers. The instrumentalisation of the "oppressed women" as a justification for the domination of the "white man" on the "brown man," which erases the economic, social, cultural and historical components conditioning the performance of the Sati, consequently induces the appropriation of their discourses and agency. "The subaltern cannot speak," Spivak implicitly concludes.

If, on the one side, the essay has been read, and notably by the Subaltern Studies group, as a contribution to the identification of the colonial structures of oppression,[2] some feminist critiques, on the other side, have lamented that this type of archaic discourse, which reproduces the Orientalist representation of the Indian "veiled woman" (which Spivak's essay paradoxically attempted to unravel), denies both the heterogeneity of women's experience, and their "everyday forms

[1] Notably Julie Stephens, "Feminist Fictions: A Critique of the Category 'Non-Western Woman' in Feminist Writing on India"; Deepika Bahri, "Feminism in/and Postcolonialism"; Gayatri C. Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame"; Chandra T. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses."

[2] See, notably Veena Das, "Subaltern as Perspective," 310.

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of resistance." In their fascinating study on women's oral traditions in rural Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold denounce the simplification of the women's response to the patriarchal authority in a traditional context and aim at underlining the way women can express their "resistance to dominating power" through metaphors, speech ambiguities, and gestures in folk songs, tales and jokes, such as "rituals of rebellion." They aim at showing that this "counter-system," drawn up in women's imaginative expression, can demonstrate that "the subaltern can speak" in an alternative language:

> In this book, we raise questions concerning the force, the persuasiveness, and the salience of dominant cultural propositions about patriliny, hierarchy, and women's subordination in everyday experience, and questions concerning the contexts in which they are likely to be invoked and who is likely to invoke them. We find that although neither men nor women would normally dispute these understandings of North Indian kinship relations in interview situations, they are clearly open to ironic, shifting, and ambiguous evaluations in the rhetoric and politics of everyday language use, in strategies of marriage arrangement, and in certain genres of oral traditions, particularly those performed by women. Thus we must pay close attention to the contexts in which words are spoken. If we record only women's responses to our own questions, we may all too quickly come to the conclusion that they cannot speak subversively and critically, that their voices are muted by the weight of male dominance and their own acquiescence in the face of "tradition."[3]

The paradigm of a passive and docile woman furthermore echoes what the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar identified as "the model of all Indian wives,"[4] embodied by the figure of Sītā, which both the Indian and the Western feminist discourses furiously try to deconstruct, or at least to expose. Indeed, as Raheja and Gold write:

> Characterizations of South Asian women as repressed and submissive are also half-truths in the sense that, at times, submission and silence may be conscious strategies of self-representation deployed when it is expedient to do so, before particular audiences and in particular contexts. They may often, in other words, be something of a discontinuity, a schism, between conventional representations and practices, on the one hand, and experience, on the other.[5]

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[3] Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words. Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India*, 19–20.

[4] "The ideal of womanhood embodied by Sita is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband's rejections, slights or thoughtlessness… The moral is the familiar one: 'Whether treated well or ill, a wife should never indulge in ire.'" Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World*, 66.

[5] Goodwin Raheja and Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words*, 11.

In other words, the reception of Women and Gender Studies in India forms a significant part of the stormy discussions regarding the definition of "authenticity" and "Indianness" which have been raging for approximately two decades in Indian (notably literary) criticism, with its revivalist and nationalist accents, as voiced, for example, by Jaidev's essay, "The Culture of Pastiche," whose first lines are indeed eloquent:

> This monograph is an inquiry into the nature of cultural pastiche, its condition of possibility and its consequences in Third-World societies. The culture of pastiche denotes a vitiated form of inter-cultural contact between such societies and the West, vitiated because the contact occurs along non-cultural, "power" lines rather than cultural ones. This culture is the outcome of that political situation in which the "weaker" cultures adopt, not adapt, Western cultural codes, and adopt them not because they are relevant, good or necessary but because they signify power and prestige. The codes are seldom appreciated in their peculiar socio-historical context, and they are violently imposed upon the native culture without any regard for their relevance of legitimacy.[6]

The main issue raised by the treatment of feminism in this type of criticism, but also, in fact, in Gayatri Spivak's discourse, lies in the imbalance (and consequently, the conflictual relationship) between the massive Western production of feminist studies, their impressive development and diffusion since the 1970s on the one side, and on the other side the promotion of an indigenous culture which is certainly based on a patriarchal structure, but where the woman plays a socially, culturally and politically crucial role which is deservedly incompatible with the Orientalist representation of the "veiled woman" embodied by docile Sītā. Evidence of this is found in the multiplicity of Sītā's representations in Hindu mythology, along with the possible multiplicity of the readings of these representations, where the complexity of her agency can be (and has been) discussed.[7] Evidence is also found in the crucial political role held in the Nationalist movement by women,[8] which M. K. Gandhi's discourse, for example, strongly promoted, even if some

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[6] The first lines of *The Culture of Pastiche*'s introduction clearly display the position adopted by Jaidev *vis-à-vis* what he defines as Western cultural hegemony. Jaidev, *The Culture of Pastiche*, ix.

[7] See, notably Ruth Vanita's interpretation of Sītā's complex agency in *Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's Smile. Essays on Gender, Sexuality, and Culture*: "In this essay, I examine Sita's smile and laughter in the *Adbhut Ramayana*, arguing that while this text focuses on her Goddess aspect, it simultaneously foregrounds the paradoxical dynamic inherent in the normative human husband-wife relation, where the wife plays the role of social subordinate even while acting as an autonomous agent. Unlike the many Ramayanas wherein Sita's agency consists primarily in her resistance to injustice, the *Adbhut Ramayana* writes Sita not as a victim (whether suffering or resisting) but almost entirely as an agent," 219–20.

[8] A role which, besides being practical, was also and mainly symbolic, see Partha Chatterjee, "The Nation and its Women."

critics identified in this "archaic" promotion a strategy to encourage the passivity of the housewife by granting her domesticity a positive political value.[9] Further evidence is found in the significant modern and ancient feminine writing in South Asia, which includes great figures of resistance, such as Mīrā Bāī or, more recently, Amrita Pritam (Panjabi), Mahasweta Devi (Bengali) or Ambai (Tamil). Some (rare) histories of literature may indeed have highlighted the import of women's writing in the South Asian context: the two volumes of Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's *Women Writing in India. 600 B.C. to the Present* (1991) thus aim at both underlining the richness and the variety of women writing, and deconstructing a history of literature where these literatures have been minimized, ignored or stereotyped.

Evidence, finally, is found in the dynamism and the diversity of women's movements in South Asia from the nineteenth century onwards, which Radha Kumar's fascinating *The History of Doing* (1993) highlighted. Implicitly deconstructing the image of the "docile Indian wife" embodied by Sītā, Radha Kumar undertakes a re-reading of the colonial and post-colonial history of India where the "women's issue," initially raised by men as part of the movement for social reform, was gradually re-appropriated by women themselves. Using archives, such as photographs, posters, newspapers and magazines, Radha Kumar shows the plurality of the women's movements in India, stressing their historical and social significance, from the nationalist period onwards. Comparing the women's movements in India with the rise of feminism in post-revolutionary France, Radha Kumar however reveals their indigenous roots and concerns, whose origins lay in the agenda of the social reforms in Bengal and Maharashtra.

The issue raised by feminism in India thus lies in the *ambiguous relationship* between the Orientalist representation of the veiled woman, surprisingly often implicitly promoted by an overwhelmingly Western feminist criticism,[10] and a complex and plural indigenous image of womanhood.

Literature plays a crucial role within these debates as it allows the entanglement of the various sources and images of womanhood, as shown by major authors such as the poetess Mallika Sen Gupta (Bengali), or the novelists Anjana Appachana (English) and Mrinal Pandey (Hindi). If the literary representation of women in India was certainly transformed by the Western discourse of the 1970s and 1990s regarding the "gender issue," it indeed does not bear witness to a radical break with the traditional models fiercely denounced by feminist discourses, models that modern literature keeps on re-inventing. In other words, this paper aims at highlighting the way literature bears witness to both an indigenisation of western feminist theories, and a feminist re-reading of the indigenous figures of womanhood. Literature thus

[9] See Madhu Kiswar, "Gandhi on Women," 1691–1702.

[10] See Julie Stephens, "Feminist Fictions: A Critique of the Category 'Non-Western Woman' in Feminist Writing on India."

makes possible both the discussion and the deconstruction of the fixity of the Indian "veiled woman" on the one side, and the universalism of some mainstream feminist theories on the other side.

In this regard, I will explore two Hindi novels written in the 1990s: Krishna Baldev Vaid's *Līlā* (1990), and Mridula Garg's *Kaṭhgulāb* (1996). This selection is justified by some of the novels' specificities: first, as I do not wish to discuss the gender of writing, the comparison between a novel written by a man and a novel written by a woman seemed appropriate to me. Moreover, I will show that these novels can be ideologically but also stylistically defined as feminist, as they both promote women's expression in the narrative structure itself, and denounce male (ideological or physical) oppression on women. Finally, interestingly, both authors have been bitterly denounced by Jaidev as imitating western patterns, and their work has been characterized as "Western pastiches." A critical reading will thus allow me to underline the deep indigenous roots of both fictions.

Consequently, this essay implicitly aims at re-examining the question of "Indianness" in the literature written in the indigenous languages, from a double perspective: first, by stressing the dynamism and the heterogeneity of modern Hindi fiction (both novels are fairly recent), I wish to show that vernacular literatures cannot be dissociated from the social, political and historical dynamics in which they have been produced, and where, today, the issues of women, femininity, and gender play a crucial role. Despite the alleged South Asian archaisms regarding the condition of women, which aim at confining them in an exclusive domestic role, literature oppositely participates in the deconstruction of such stereotypes. Besides, this paper aims to show that the "authenticity" celebrated and sought by critics such as Jaidev, relies neither on exclusive linguistic criterion nor on the absence of exogenous references, and, consequently, on the accumulation of indigenous sources. This essay aims to show the way modern literature can absorb and re-interpret various sources, thus discussing the problematic definitions of "authentic" and "indigenous."

"Līlā": Towards a composite womanhood

Līlā, named after the main character, is a short novel (or a novella) which portrays in various scenes the daily routine and the various aspects of a couple: the couple as a social structure, defined by domesticity and kinship; the couple as an interaction between two individuals, two *genders*, which justifies the conflicts, the arguments and the ideological divergences; the couple as the interaction between two lovers, characterized by romanticism, fantasy and eroticism.

The novel, which is non-chronological, is structured around a succession of seemingly independent sequences and groups of sequences:

Pages	Theme	Sub-theme
1–7	Trip abroad	The Church
		The Café
8–19	Domestic fights	Fight 1: Recalling pre-marriage events
		Fight 2: Recalling post-marriage events
		Fight 3: Walk to the Ridge
20–21	The picture: depiction of a picture of Līlā	
22–40	The dialogue	
41–49	The dreams	Dream of the crib
		Dream of the bridge
		Dream of the village
		Dream of the graveyard
		Dream of the train
50–54	Morning walk with Līlā (includes a dream)	

This novel thus articulates realistic narrative sequences with passionate depictions of Līlā, followed by several dreams where the narrator, Līlā's husband, seems to be haunted by the wonderful, erotic and terrifying character of his wife. But surprisingly, the narrative structure is broken in the middle of the novel by a long dramatic dialogue between Līlā and the narrator, where he expresses his paradoxical wish for liberation (*mokṣa*), metaphorically embodied in both a "path" (*rastā*) and a "voice" (*āvāz*) which guides him, but which Līlā, excluded from this purpose, is not able to hear:

> I: Now all these fights seem absurd. In fact, they seemed absurd to me even then. Even when my eyes were red with rage and my tongue dripped venom and my mind was seething with malice and my brain was about to burst—even then I could hear a thin but clear voice from within: This is all utterly absurd, trivial, and pointless. It was this voice that broke my resistance and made me kneel before you. No cause of any fight could withstand that voice. It was that voice that robbed my strength as well as restored it to me. In fact my strength was the other side of my weakness. After every

surrender the desire for a conquest got even bigger. This voice, however, didn't think in terms of surrender or conquest.
Līlā: That voice of yours considered every action absurd and pointless.
I: My every action.
Līlā: Every action.
I: You are relentless.
Līlā: Not only every action but also everything, every word, every desire, every relationship, every…
I: Don't make a list. Let's say that action includes everything.
Līlā: That voice of yours was my real adversary. [11]

By contrast, in this dialogue, Līlā's discourse is pragmatic and "reasonable": she is described by the "voice," as an echo to the narrator's voice, as "materialistic, earthly, superficial" (*saṁsārī*, *saṁskārī*, *satahī*). Nevertheless (and here lies the paradox), one of the nerve centres of this dialogue is the theme of the impossible fusion between the spouses, which is of course a commonplace of the rhetoric of love, but which is elaborated at length through a vast metaphorical network based on the spouses' "resemblance." Playing with speech "mimicry," they keep on evoking their physical similarities, which could transcend their ideological divergences, and their voices, at the end of the dialogue, aim at fusing in an exultant "us":

Līlā: I shall start going on that path from tomorrow.
I: Alone?
Līlā: Alone.
I: I shall change my time.
Līlā: When I return, you'll ask me...
I: So, you are back from your stroll?
Līlā: Yes, I'm back.
I: How was it today?
Līlā: It was fine.
I: Like every day?
Līlā: Yes.
I: You mean it wasn't fine?
Līlā: Yes.
I: Why hide it from me?
Līlā: I don't.
I: The joy of merging in the dark.
Līlā: With each other.
I: Let's go to sleep now.
Līlā: Yes.

[11] All the following excerpts are translated by the author. K. B. Vaid, "Leela," 21–64.

Beyond the narrative originality of this twenty-page dialogue, I wish to stress the crucial function it has for a feminist reading of the novel. At the heart of the narrative of a man who is desperately striving, by all means possible, to understand his wife, to understand this strange *otherness* that is womanhood, the voice of this woman suddenly imposes and expresses her feminine ideology, her "gendered" self. This polyphonic structure in a strictly Bakhtinian sense[12] bears witness to the novel's feminist agenda, where the empowerment of woman is performed within the narrative space itself, as a usurpation of the narrator's (or, as a paradox, the *authorial*) voice. The story *about* a woman unexpectedly gives birth to the story *of* a woman. Besides, the story about a woman also bears several feminist characteristics, quite typically of the *Naī kahānī,* the "New Hindi Story," which emerged in the early 1950s: the depictions of the woman's feelings and frustrations as a young daughter-in-law in the context of a joint family; the depictions of the couple's fights, where expectations and ideologies collide; and above all, the exploration of the couple's intimacy where the married woman can express her love and sexual desire for her husband.[13] The free expression and the agency of women made "subjects," liberated from an exclusively domestic role, are indeed promoted by the novelist Kamleshwar, considered as the "theoretician" of *Naī kahānī*, in his essay *Naī kahānī kī bhūmikā* ("The role of the New Story," 1969). Indeed, in fiction *also*, "women should be women," Kamleshwar writes, "and not Sītās or heroines." Women, he argues, "should not be confined to domestic roles, as mothers, wives or sisters-in-law, they should be granted more than domestic constraints; they should be full characters, with their own expectations and their own desires."[14] In this regard, Rajendra Yadav's novel *Sārā ākāś* ("All the sky," 1952, translated as *Strangers on the Roof*, 1994) is quite impressive: Samar's wife, silenced by the family's authority, closes the novel's first half by a long cry, thus expressing all her anger and frustration regarding her difficult condition as an "exiled" young bride, mistreated by her in-laws in the context of a joint family, but also all her love and desire for her husband *as a woman*. Whereas this first person narrative is exclusively guided by Samar's point of view, a "woman as a subject" is suddenly revealed to him:

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[12] Reading Dostoevsky's fiction, Mikhail Bakhtin elaborated the definition of the "polyphonic novel" as a narrative space where the characters enjoy an independent ideology and consciousness, not "voiceless slaves … but *free* people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him. *A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels*." He thus identifies "a *plurality of consciousnesses with equal rights and each with its own world*," heroes which are "*not only objects of authorial discourses but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse.*" Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 6–7.

[13] See Thomas de Bruijn, "Impostors in the Literary Field: Aspect of Characterization in Nayi Kahani," 127–45.

[14] Kamleshwar, *Naī kahānī kī bhūmikā,* 19.

> "Had I ever, even for a moment, tried to realize that she too was a living being? That she too might feel happiness or sorrow? That she too might have desires and aspirations? Never! Never! Never once I wondered what supported her, in what hope she toiled here night and day like a servant. After all, she was not our purchased slave."[15]

Likewise, in *Mitro marjānī* (1967, translated as *To Hell with you, Mitro!*, 2007), Krishna Sobti's mischievous heroine Mitro imposes in her subversive discourse a critical revaluation of women's roles in the traditional context, from both a social and a fictional point of view. Martin Christof-Fuchsle (1998) identifies in the novel a virulent denunciation of the depiction of women in Hindi novels: the "alternative" female character, Mitro, defies social norms by leading a marginal existence though being a faithful wife to her husband. She thus embodies neither the "ideal wife," nor the courtesan, two figures which Hindi novels, according to Sobti in M. Christof-Fuchsle's essay, may have polarized when representing women, but a non-essential, alternative woman. Similarly, in both her discourse and her own representation, Līlā is not confined to the ossified image of the veiled Indian woman, of docile Sītā.

Nevertheless, the reference to the figure of Sītā in the novel is quite problematic: despite Līlā's narrative empowerment, the accumulation of stereotypes on womanhood, and furthermore on an archaic womanhood as represented by Sītā, could corrupt the alleged feminist agenda, and invite a contradictory reading of this novel.

Indeed, whereas the narrative sequences stress the narrator's attempt to understand his wife, she nevertheless mostly remains an "image" (*tasvīr*), embodied by a highly metaphorical sequence, where the narrator depicts a picture of half-naked Līlā:

> "In this picture Līlā appears to be anxiety free. Like water and wind and sky and sand. Her shoulders like wet lotuses. Her neck like a curved line. Her breasts like the doves of peace. Her hands making that strange suggestive gesture (...). In this picture Līlā is like Lailā. A sprightly modern Lailā. Not an accomplished wife but a wild belle oozing erotic ecstasy. Free from domestic darkness. Untainted by the dust of married life. Today I have seen this picture after so many years. It looks as if I have seen another woman hidden inside Līlā. This other woman is genuine. Līlā is not playing a role in this picture."[16]

As an incarnation of love and eroticism, Līlā is thus compared to Lailā, the figure of passion in the Arabo-Persian literary tradition.[17] In another sequence, where Līlā is depicted as a housewife, "Her hair intertwined with domestic quarrels, her eyes

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[15] Rajendra Yadav, *Strangers on the Roof*, 94.
[16] Ibid.
[17] See, among other editions, Nizami-e Gangavi, *Laili and Majnun*.

choked with their dust," who obediently follows her husband after a quarrel at home, she is compared to Sītā:

> "I don't remember the other details of the quarrel that evening but I do recall clearly that as I left the house after smashing something against the wall, Līlā got up and followed me out like a sullen Sītā following an offended Rāma."

Finally, in a sequence which follows another quarrel between the spouses, a furious Līlā is then compared to the goddess Caṇḍī, an incarnation of Śakti**.**

> "Her eyes were fixed on the fading horizons, her lips pursed, her hands closed in fists, her neck had a taut vein that looked like a string, her shoulders trembled, her head cloth had fallen at her feet, her breasts heaved like waves .... Years later I gave a name to that infuriated form of hers—the goddess Caṇḍī. Sometimes she'd laugh at this name, but sometimes she became so furious that I'd murmur in my mind—The Great Caṇḍī."

Consequently, whatever Līlā's condition is (housewifely, furious or erotic), she adopts a certain stereotype of womanhood which is emphasized by a set of metaphors: fire for Candī, dust for Sītā, "ecological" metaphors for Lailā ("butterflies," *titlīyõ*; "flowers," *phūl*; "dove," *fāk̲h̲tā*; "bird," *parindā*; "cloud," *bādal*).

Moreover, a close reading of the dialogue reveals the stereotypical character of both discourses, which propose cultural archetypes of gender and its social role. Despite the narrative autonomy of Līlā's voice, a hierarchical relationship prevails between man and woman, as shown by this table:

	Narrator/male	**Līlā/female**
Type of discourse	Answer	Question
Topic	I	You
Purpose	To follow the path: liberation	To follow her husband: bond
Qualities	Strong Wise Extraordinary	Weak Superficial Ordinary
Relationship to Reason	Can hear the voice	Cannot hear the voice
Relationship to Spirituality	Is spiritual	Is material

As a matter of fact, whereas Līlā mainly questions her husband (about his wishes, expectations, and purposes), he answers, explains, thus *shaping* the dialogue, which is moreover elaborated with a central and almost unique topic: the path of liberation followed by the narrator, which Līlā unsuccessfully tries to follow as a docile Sītā. The characteristics of both spouses can thus distinctly be related to the Hindu traditional scheme: *mokṣa* as a male feature or even *duty*, is opposed to *kāma* and *artha* as female features, which divert man from his spiritual path and religious duties.[18] A set of metaphors, as shown earlier, emphasizes these categories: the "voice," as a spiritual manifestation that the husband can hear but not the wife; the "path," that the male alone can follow. This clear opposition between the inside/the material/the female on the one side *vs.* the outside/the spiritual/the male on the other side does not contradict the polyphonic character of the dialogue; on the contrary, it reinforces it, as two defined ideologies are opposed.[19]

If K. B. Vaid's novel elaborates a composite and multiple "woman" through a palette of metaphors which refer to different traditions, and thus bear witness to the hybrid character of the South Asian cultural ethos,[20] it also interestingly reveals the harmonious cohabitation between the narrative performance of a woman's empowerment and the mythical imagination of womanhood which the narrator resorts to, the "mythic consciousness" in Nirmal Verma's words.[21] The multiplicity

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[18] "The Indian woman is looked upon in turn with idealization, desire, and alarm …. Though subservient to man, she nevertheless dominates a certain section in his life as a mother; as she grows older she often has an increasingly important say in family affairs. She is both raised to the level of a goddess in the home, and herself should revere her husband as a god, though this religious element has almost vanished from urban middle-class homes. Similarly, sexual love is raised to the level of mystical ecstasy, but is also looked upon as the most severe hindrance to the spiritual development of the husband. The woman is both like Sītā, the Hindu ideal of the selfless and devoted wife, and like the terrible Kālī, a witch-like goddess who punishes and deprives her children of pleasure." Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree. A Study of Indian Culture and Society*, 114.

[19] "Ideology," "autonomous ideas" or "independent consciousness," in Mikhail Bakhtin's words. See *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

[20] As underlined by the critic K. Satchidanandan: "No doubt, we need from time to time to problematize the idea of cultural homogeneity that has been haunting the dominant discourse in the country, not in order to discard the idea of unity, but to reemphasize diversity and to revise understanding of unity, to see it as a continuous and evolving process of open dialogue and creative interaction among our different languages and cultures including the marginalized ones of the minorities, of the Dalits and of the tribals, rather than as the hegemonic presence of some central voice, say, of a caste from the past or a class from the present that bulldozes all unevenness and crushes all differences. Indian culture is no monolith and Indian literature is not a monologue." K. Satchidanandan, *Indian Literature: Positions and Propositions*, 28–29.

[21] "Mythic consciousness" defined by Nirmal Verma as man's consciousness nurtured by a living network of "signs," of "symbols" and "myths" (or mythologies) which refer to a local environment, an imaginative field which penetrates art as a "desperate attempt to retrieve man's wholeness," to retrieve this "mythic consciousness." Nirmal Verma, *Word and Memory*, 17–23.

of forms and references and the oscillation between a feminist narrative structure and archaic representations of womanhood allow the emergence of a female consciousness which bears witness to her complexity and her individuality through the display of her various forms, thus transcending the fixed image of a veiled, or even a resistant woman. The reference to Sītā is indeed ambiguous: not only is she "sullen," indeed, she is not particularly docile, but she also turns into the passionate Lailā in the next sequence, thus expressing all the eroticism that the Sītā legend denies her, as an asexual model of "chastity," "purity" and "faithfulness."[22] She is thus allowed to fully become a woman by being provided with erotic features, which do not contradict Sītā's character as a metaphor for docility and submission but enhance her with a new layer. Resorting to traditional images of womanhood does not challenge a feminist reading of the novel, but prevents a radical break between traditional representation and a discourse on modernity.

Kaṭhgulāb: from gender indeterminacy to eco-feminism

Kaṭhgulāb ("Woodrose," 1996) can be considered as a radical feminist novel which articulates a didactical rhetoric of the male oppression of women. Mridula Garg's reputation was already firmly established: in 1980, she was arrested and charged under the Obscenity Act for depicting a woman's mechanical participation in a sexual act with her husband in her novel *Cittakobrā*. Nevertheless, Mridula Garg's tough feminism also reveals a subtle meditation on the individual alienated from the paradoxes of his/her biological, social and historical condition. Starting with the conflict between women and their own flesh, where the requirement of motherhood justifies both their alienation and their supremacy, their power as *Śakti* is a recurrent figure in Mridula Garg's novels. If Mridula Garg's entire work is aimed at denouncing the physical and spiritual oppression of women, notably in the alienating space that is marriage, the solution she proposes transcends the simple reversal of the relations of domination, i.e., nature, experienced as the path to liberation, embodying a space of fertility and renewal freed from the bonds of male/female confrontation, where the individual can blossom and fulfil their achievement within the context of gender indeterminacy.

As a matter of fact, through the stories of four women and one man, the five-voice novel *Kaṭhgulāb* displays all the stereotypes of the male oppression of women. Smitā, who has been sordidly raped by her brother-in-law, runs away from the family home and her beloved "woodrose" (*kaṭhgulāb*). She ends up in America where she describes herself as sad and lonely, and where she sees trees as her only friends:

> "The sugar maple was my special friend. Her avarice knew no bounds. She was not willing to turn her back on her old green leaves, but she was also ready to try out

[22] See Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*.

> new colours on a daily basis (…). Under the sugar maple's deep rainbow shade, I felt safe from the cold, the wind, my loneliness and the merciless light. I began to have supper with her. I would take sandwiches and hot tea in a thermos. Wrapped in her comforting hug, I would eat and drink, and I would talk. To her."[23]

Smitā finally marries her psychotherapist, a horrible egoistic male chauvinist who beats her and rapes her, provoking a miscarriage. In the centre for abused women where she finds shelter, she meets Marianne, who relates her story. Lonely, brilliant and rich, Marianne had married an unsuccessful novelist. He had asked her to quit her job at the University in order to help him in his research, and forced her to have an abortion as he had not wanted to have children ("he murdered my child," Marianne says); and finally, he had stolen her notebook to publish it under his own name as the novel *Women of the Earth*. She had divorced him, slowly forgotten her hatred towards men and re-married a "down to earth" accountant with whom she had desperately tried to have a child. After several miscarriages, it had turned out that she was biologically unable to carry a child and she had decided to adopt one. When a little girl was proposed, her husband had suddenly changed his mind: he did not like little children, he had had two already and did not want any more. After this failure, they had divorced. Marianne had sadly realized that she would never be a mother:

> "I am a woman, an absolutely traditional, unsophisticated, nature-struck (*prakṛt*) woman… I want to observe my dependent child as she grows independent, want to invest in her independence. I want to rear and nurture, bring order and beauty. I want to be a creator (*sarjak*) …"[24]

Back in India, the next story, written in colloquial Hindi, is that of Narmadā, Smitā's sister's servant, who has also been abused by men, who is also single and childless, and spends her time taking care of the children of others:

> "My destiny! I had neither man nor child. In those two years my lover and I were together so many times… but my womb remained empty. Had I but one child, there would be someone to call my own. I'm not afraid of the world, I would have stayed in this room and brought him up. My destiny again, that I tended strangers as if they were my own and belonged to no one. When I carried my sister's kids and Bawla in my arms I didn't understand any of this; as they grew older, they distanced themselves from me. Then I reared Neerja and Pardeep as if they were my own. But as soon as I thought of them as my own, their black-faced mother's loveless heart showed me my place."[25]

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[23] Mridula Garg, *The Country of Goodbyes*, 21.
[24] Ibid., 93–94.
[25] Ibid., 137.

Then follows the story of Asīmā, an angry and rebellious woman, who was Smitā's best friend before she left for America. Spurred by the hatred of men, starting with her chauvinist father and brother, she works for an association for the education of girls:

> "My name is Aseema. What! I can hear you exclaim, Aseema is no name for a girl. Without limits – who's ever heard of a girl being called that? Boys are often named Aseem [means: "unlimited"], though, I suppose that's what male chauvinism is all about. Girls have to remain within limits while boys are free to cross them. So it was my pipsqueak of a brother who was named Aseem by my parents and I was just, old-fashioned Seema. Limited. Within boundaries or fetters or whatever. I changed it and made it Aseema, without so much as a by your leave. Let any male cross over into my territory and I will break his leg and attach it to his butt like his tail. I detest men. Bastard is too mild a word to describe them. Each one a bigger harami that the other. Parasites, all of them, living off women."[26]

Finally, at the end of the novel, comes the lyrical, spiritual and hopeful story of Vipin, Asīmā's colleague and close friend, who desperately wants to have a child. He meets Smitā as soon as she returns to India and decides to propose to her in order to adopt a baby. His wife would work and he would stay at home, taking care of the child. He repeatedly mentions his wish for pregnancy, his frustration not to have the biological capacity to carry a child and to be condemned to assume his masculinity:

> "I know there is a lot of talk about test-tube babies these days and just look at the paradox in that. Test-tube baby. As if a human baby grows entirely in a test-tube. Only the seed is fertilized in the test-tube, after that it needs the shelter of a womb to grow into a baby. And why just the womb? Only a woman can breast-feed, and even the most selfish woman has the capacity to do this. With such pure love at her disposal, why shouldn't she scale the heights of refinement and feeling? This is why the dependent, handicapped male makes such a hue and cry about his identity. Cut-throat competition in the office, a show of strength in the field of war – can't win a woman over with his heart, so he scores over other men in the arena of physical achievement. Pretends he has vanquished women, too."[27]

He thus meditates on the ambivalent sexual nature of man which is, according to him, embodied in the mythical figure of *Ardhanārīśvar*, the hermaphrodite god produced by the couple Śiv-śakti.[28] But as he is about to propose to Smitā, he meets

[26] Ibid., 142.
[27] Ibid., 190.
[28] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty identifies a multiplicity of genealogies of *Ardhanārīśvar*, in different texts and under different forms, as, she writes, "their variations evolve in the context of a changing set of ideas about ideal and real relationships between male and female." *Women, Androgynes and Other mythical Beasts*, 310.

her niece, Nīrjā, whose youth and vitality fascinate him. They become lovers and quickly decide to get married in order to have a child, thus responding to Vipin's deep wish. Unfortunately, Nīrjā happens to be barren. She feels guilty and leaves Vipin, who had already transcended his wish for children thanks to Nīrjā's love. He decides to join Smitā and Asīmā in Godhar, a village where they are working for Asīmā's organization, and where in the wilderness he would be able to liberate himself and find real power through going back to the land:

> Everything would happen. Trees and flowers would flourish, Vipin would have garlic planted in the fields, the income of families in Godhad would increase. Children would go to school, women would find work. Poverty and want would decrease. Vipin would do it all, but receive nothing in return. The woodrose would grow and green the barren soil but Vipin would still see the barren land beneath. He knew he was not waiting for Godhad, he was only going there to do whatever needed to be done. Struggle, plan, endure, achieve, lead, follow… everything. He had great power (*śakti*), the boundless power of sorrow. He was free. Free (*mukt*) of the cycle of joy and sorrow. He would do whatever was the need of the hour, fearlessly and without misgiving, because he would not wait for anything to happen in his life ever again.[29]

Such an ideological discourse displays both a typical feminist denunciation of the structures of male oppression, and a meditation on gender as a social construction, on gender indeterminacy and on the myth of biological alienation. The novel thus implicitly questions the "gender trouble" by highlighting the paradoxes of the characters' gender identity, alienated to both a biological and a social condition which they deplore: Marianne, Narmadā, Nīrjā and Smitā have been unable to conceive a child, and will not be mothers; Asīmā rejects her female identity, embodied in her name; Vipin does not wish to assume his masculinity, which he links to violence and sterility. The incoherence which lies in the formulation of gender identity, built on unstable categories and conditioned by a social structure, is certainly compatible with Judith Butler's discourse on the gender performativity: she identifies the social construction of gender difference as, "not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization,"[30] in other words as *culturally* symbolic acts, repetitions and rituals. At the sources of Vipin's discourse indeed lies an acute denunciation of social performativity, which alienates individuals and transforms their identity into gendered artifices:

> "You must think, what is he going on about … just like a woman. Sorrow, god, strength, power – just forget all this and be a man. You're free to think this. I've already confessed that, thanks to Aseema, the Ardhanarishwar in me has a prominent feminine side."[31]

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[29] Ibid., 230.
[30] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, xv.
[31] Mridula Garg, *The Country of Goodbyes*, 195.

By proposing an alternative identity scheme, not subservient to biological traits, which are certainly inevitable but also made salient, Vipin politicizes a philosophical discourse on the ambivalent nature of human beings. He thus calls for the acknowledgement of this ambivalence, which can bring coherence and consistency to the articulation between his (male) body and his (maternal) desire. This "subversion of identity" as defended by Vipin, this political gesture which aims at "undoing gender," echoes the Queer strategy theorized by Judith Butler, which she identifies as a bilateral passage between "politics and parody," demonstrating the subject's capacity to act *beyond* gender, to recover her/his identity *beyond* cultural construction and to subvert gender: "Culture and discourse *mire* the subject, but do not constitute that subject," writes Butler.[32] Gender is deconstructed within the political act of parody (the Drag Queen for Judith Butler, the "Be a man" for Vipin), gender is contradicted by Vipin's aspirations to gender indeterminacy, to a "golden age" as the one advocated by some Queer theories.[33]

Nevertheless, the originality of Vipin's discourse lies in the location of this golden age. His reference to *Ardhanārīśvar* certainly aims at unravelling gender essentialism, but also at identifying subversion's cultural roots: the "Queer" discourse claimed by Vipin is embodied in a mythological figure which *fertilizes* Indian imagination. It thus engrains ambivalence and subversion in an indigenous context where its presence can question the fixity of gender identities as represented by the archetypal figures of manhood and womanhood embodied by Rām and Sītā. In *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty thus implicitly unravels the presupposition regarding the stratification of gender in Hindu mythology by stressing, beyond the myths regarding female domination, the diversity of ambivalent or hybrid forms, hermaphrodites and androgynes, of myths of transvestism and inversion ("sex change and sex exchange") where a reversal of the social or even biological roles (such as male pregnancy) of both genders is performed.

Besides, the accumulation of ecological metaphors on the one side (Smitā's trees, Godhar's fertile land, the garlic that Vipin grows), and the idealization of the rural space on the other side, qualifies the rejection of "nature" as justifying gender essentialisms. These metaphors also echo the novel's obsessive discourse on motherhood and the female biological condition, where the absence of a child is not experienced as a choice (the liberated woman's choice, as motivating, for example, the legalization of abortion in the 1970s), but as a constraint and a frustration, as metaphorized by the constant and nostalgic allusions to Smitā's woodrose:

> "In one corner of the garden stands a bush of woodrose. I planted it. One of my father's friends had brought two woodrose blooms from Hyderabad but Namita had

[32] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 143.

[33] And notably Monique Wittig, who advocates "a new form of androgyny," which could enrich the whole of humanity; see *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*.

broken them in a rough game of catch and snatch. Two hard black seeds as large as coat buttons had fallen out. I snatched them up immediately. Such big seeds. The tree would also be a big one, no? I took the seeds to a gardener from the factory who used to grow beans and peas and he said, 'What are these stony things you've got. They are so hard, how can they possibly grow. Just throw them away.' Now why would I do that. I filled a vessel with water and placed the seeds in it. I had seen Ma soak dal like that, hadn't I? After three or four days they softened. I thought they had rotted, the poor things, so I dug up the mud in one corner of the garden and buried them there. And then came a fairy or a sorceress and waved her magic wand. Such a lush and lovely shrub came up that we were all taken by surprise. Soon it grew so dense that Ma had to have it supported by four poles. It turned into a good-sized hut and became my personal space, my very own home."[34]

Land, the earth, nature, thus offer the possibility of returning to a non-gendered ideal space, which is not subject to the conflicts and the violence which characterizes the relationships between men and women. It can also allow for the rephrasing of fertility, the re-interpretation of womb as a fertile land, by restoring the original relationship which links woman to nature, both alienated, both exploited in an environment where patriarchy and man's violence can be associated with nature exploitation, agricultural overproduction and urbanization.

The originality of Mridula Garg's feminism is thus the analogy she produces between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women, between feminism and ecology. She indeed defines her work as "eco-feminist writing,"[35] referring to the theories which aim at establishing a collusion between ecologist and feminist discourses. Identifying a common oppression between woman and nature, an oppression which stems from the sexualisation of nature, eco-feminism advocates the abolition of dualisms (dominant *vs.* dominated, culture *vs.* nature, man *vs.* woman) and an alternative and ecological lifestyle. In India, the "Chipko" movement is one of the most dynamic illustrations of eco-feminism: in 1973, in response to the project of massive deforestation in the Himalayan foothills, a group of village women decided to cling (*cipaknā*, in Hindi) to trees in order to stop their

[34] Mridula Garg, *The Country of Goodbyes*, 5.

[35] Ambika Ananth, "Mridula Garg, in Conversation with Ambika Ananth," where Mridula Garg defines eco-feminist writing as follows: "In the post-imperialist era, women writers refashioned a central metaphor, that of motherhood. It is now recognized that there is no such thing as barren women. Any woman willing to nurture any one is a mother. From nurturing human beings, they have gone on to nurture and replenish nature itself. Then started an astute interest in the protection and revival of the environment and ecology. It has spread into their writing; the image of their male protagonists has also under gone a change. One of my male protagonists, as I told you earlier in my novel '*Kathgulab*,' I depicted as the new 'ardhanaareshwara,' who along with the female protagonists, transcended the womb and became one with the 'bio-sphere.' This is the metaphor common to the eco-feminist writing."

felling.[36] The movement quickly spread over India, carried by voices such as the famous eco-feminist physicist Vandana Shiva.[37]

If Indian eco-feminism has been partly inspired by both the Gandhian promotion of Indian villages and his pacifist mode of action, it clearly differs from it, notably in Mridula Garg's discourse, in the nature of his agenda regarding the role of women. The traditional lifestyle as conceived by Gandhi certainly presupposed the participation of women, but they remained confined to the domestic space. Women were valorized within the House, as wives, housekeepers and mothers. Furthermore, nature is not perceived as a mere environment, as a landscape, in Mridula Garg's discourse; nature is experienced as a golden age, where women can blossom through ecological and non-violent procreation,[38] and where men can blossom through the acknowledgement of their sexual ambivalence, of their femininity, this *Śakti* the novel persistently refers to.

Here lies a crucial feature of Mridula Garg's feminist rhetoric: nourished with ecologist or "indifferentialist" utopia, eco-feminist or Queer, this discourse is engrained in an indigenous cultural ethos where it aggregates to re-invented traditions: the mythological figure of *Ardhanārīśvar* embodies Vipin's ambivalence, at the heart of a male labile identity promoted by Mridula Garg; *Śakti*, the female power, embodies the positive and creative force which inspires Vipin; *prakṛti*, "nature," the "Mother-earth," can give life without the intervention of *puruṣa*, the male; *mukti*, "liberation," embodies the annihilation of the confrontation between gender and identity, nature and culture, man and woman, which is a source of violence and frustration. By stressing the sexual ambiguity of man embodied in the Tantric discourse by the fusion of Śiv, the creator, with Śakti, Mridula Garg thus promotes nature as the ideal space and the golden age of sexual indeterminacy. Re-investing an ideal human or ecological nature allows the novel to find a resolution to the conflicts which exist between both genders on the one side, and between biology and identity on the other side.

Conclusion

The originality of this discourse thus lies in the opposition it proposes between "nature," perceived as positive and then promoted, and "culture," perceived as negative as it is associated with intensive agriculture and the social construction of gender, and which aims at denying ambivalences. Even though biological determinism

[36] On the Chipko movement in Garhwal, see Kiran Dangaval, *Cipko āndolan aur nārī śakti*, and Haripriya Rangan, *Of Myths and Movements: Rewriting Chipko into Himalayan History*.

[37] See her essay *Staying Alive. Women, Ecology and Development*.

[38] The fantasy of motherhood as performed in literary creation in Mridula Garg's novel *Uske hisse kī dhūp* (1976), and the "proximity between creation and procreation," is interestingly discussed by Chandra Nisha Singh in her study *Radical Feminism and Women's Writing*, 261–66.

is discussed, the "essential" relationship between women and nature and tradition is not rejected. Interestingly, the solution to women's exploitation advocated by Mridula Garg is found in the origins, the archaisms, as shown by the recurrent mythological references displayed in the novel. Indian feminism, at least in its fictional expression, persistently recalls the close relationship between women and traditional cultures, myths and the natural environment. Re-investing in her "Female voter's *bārahmāsā*" (*bhoter meyer bāromāsī*, 2008), the traditional poetic form of the song of twelve months (*bārahmāsā*), in which women were able to sing of their sad condition as abandoned wives, the Bengali poetess Mallika Sen Gupta (1960–2011) also reminds the reader of the relationship between women and nature in a traditional rural context, relationships which condition the poem's heroine's inability to vote: hot in summer, cold in winter, diseases during the monsoon, housekeeping, agriculture, preparing the religious festivals, etc. Traditional women indeed keep on embodying Phullara, the heroine of the Bengali *bārahmāsā*, who sings her difficult condition as a hunter's wife in the forest. In the poems of such a contemporary feminist writer as Mallika Sen Gupta, mythological references are indeed legion, constantly embroiling women in these dependent relationships with nature.

Consequently, the representation of woman and womanhood, and more globally of gender, certainly depends upon the cultural definition and specificities of male and female, which thus invite us to re-think gender *not from a global but from a local* point of view. As shown by K. B. Vaid, Mridula Garg and even Mallika Sen Gupta, the universal character of womanhood, which is able to transcend the cultural, historical and social borders, has thus been fairly and amply questioned.[39] Nevertheless, these discourses also echo Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity," by considering not a single culture, but multiple *cultures* with multiple modes of "performing" gender; gender is indeed not only socially but also *culturally* constructed; the subjects are *culturally* situated, are culturally *mired*, as Judith Butler writes, who thus identifies gender as a performance, and culture as a *practice*. The poet and critic K. Satchidanandan also interestingly underlines the complexity of gender's cultural roots within a specific context, thus deconstructing all universal utopias. This context is certainly cultural, but also, as K. Satchidanandan writes, a context of class, caste, religion, region, language etc., which invites us more globally to consider identity as *multi-dimensional*, and thus, according to Satchidanandan, to "develop an indigenous semiotics that connects signs to their specific space lineage, decoding gender as an organizing principle of experience and relating forms of feminine articulation to the changing social, racial and conceptual permutations in our history."[40]

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[39] See, notably Deepika Bahri, "Feminism in/and Postcolonialism," 199–220, regarding the assumption of a "transnational feminism," and Rada Ivekovic, *Captive Gender, Ethnic Stereotypes and Cultural Boundaries*, regarding the nationalist politics of the figures of woman and womanhood.

[40] K. Satchidanandan, *Indian Literature: Positions and Propositions*, 39–40.

The "gender trouble" thus occurs not only in the subversion of identity structures, but also in the East-West relationships which seem to condition the definition of "gender": gender is culturally distinct; it has an unstable and *historicized* definition. It is continuously revitalized, nourished by history. Writing about gender, and thus writing about women, men, and culture, is not subservient to exclusive indigenous, or "traditional," or, oppositely, exogenous, criterion. As shown by K. B. Vaid's prose, language, in the diversity of its origins, bears witness perfectly to this "indigenous semiotics of gender," in the words of Satchidanandan, who undoubtedly understands this "indigenous" in the sense of a constant fertilization of traditions.

Consequently, the definition of "Indianness" cannot resort or refer to a single, monological indigenous cultural ethos, and certainly not to the sole Hindu cultural ethos, which, however, mainly prevails in "cultural" readings of identity. The positive echoes of the Western critical trends, along with the re-investment of these trends, should be considered in a dialogical perspective of "culture," which cannot deny or repress, as the nativist or revivalist critics could do, the impact of Western thought on Indian discourse, and *a fortiori* on Indian literary discourse.[41] Literature thus bears witness to the complex and ambiguous definition of "Indianness," which can no longer be considered as a counter discourse, but as a discourse nurtured by other discourses; and, consequently, can no longer be considered as an autonomous discourse but a strictly polyphonic discourse.

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[41] "One can hardly forget that Indian Literature has never been divided on linguistic lines. Shared themes, forms, concerns, experiences, influences, directions and movements, along with multilinguism and inter-language translations still keep the ideas of 'Indian Literature' dynamically alive. (…) We must accept the historical fact that Indians have been condemned by the forces of the past as well as of the present to live together or to perish and that our highly over-determined literary context demands an integrated approach and genuinely inter-linguistic and inter-disciplinary studies for its full understanding." K. Satchidanandan, *Indian Literature: Positions and Propositions*, 32–33.

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