

Pompa Banerjee. *Burning Women: Widows, Witches and Early Modern European Travellers in India*. Early Modern Cultural Studies. Palgrave, 2003. pp. xviii + 278 + illustrations.

In *Burning Women*, Pompa Banerjee poses the following question: “When European witnesses of sati watched a woman burn—why did they not seize on the analogy of burning witches in their own countries in order to better explain the unfamiliar event of sati to their audiences at home?” (35). What follows is a detailed and sophisticated analysis of the “spectral crossings” (5) between narratives of violence against women at home and in India, which Banerjee presents in the context of a “self-referential and “precolonial” Renaissance imaginary, in which travel, nation, border and self meet” (8). Over the course of five chapters Banerjee explores the representation of sati in an impressive array of European travel narratives and connects them to homegrown discourses on witch burning and womanhood in Europe. Her extensive and meticulous primary research, the subtlety of her interpretations, and the voyeuristic interest inherent

in her material make this a fascinating and engaging work. Particularly strong are chapters three and four, in which she addresses the complex ways in which sati narratives engaged with European constructions of womanhood. Chapter three explores the connections between images of sati and unstable European discourses on “good” and “bad” women. By highlighting the ambivalences inherent in European understandings of widows and wives and juxtaposing them against European accounts of both satic and Hindu widows, she shows how closely intertwined these discourses on women in both cultures were. Chapter four continues this concentration on women of both cultures, exploring a “myth” of sati’s origin, attributed to Strabo and ubiquitous in Early Modern European narratives, that explained it as a safeguard put in place to counteract Hindu women’s propensity to poison their husbands. Banerjee

explains the unfounded popularity of this explanation of sati both in terms of literary practice and of analogies with European conceptions of women, highlighting connections between poison and witchcraft and a more general criminalization of women, including the burning of European women for murdering their spouses (petty treason).

The arguments and interpretations put forward in the other chapters, though both nuanced and interesting, were less compelling. This is not because they lack the depth and quality of research, which was impressively consistent throughout, but rather because of issues raised by the central premise of Banerjee's argument; that the lack of explicit references to witch burning in early modern accounts of sati indicated a European desire to maintain the impression of Indian "otherness" by ignoring the obvious similarities between the two practices (85). This perspective, embedded in the Saidian paradigm, is premised on a very literal reading of the texts, for while no one could accuse Banerjee of failing

to fully explore the implicit connections between the imageries of sati and witch burning, in the final analysis she places too much weight on the lack of overt comparisons between what were ultimately very different phenomena. I would argue that this omission was not necessarily the result of a subconscious European desire to "make differences" between the civilized self and barbaric other, as Banerjee contends, but might also have been a reflection of what Banerjee refers to as the "dissimilar cultural encoding" (35) of the two practices. Witch burning, from the early modern European perspective, was a justifiable, and indeed necessary, punishment for a heinous and dangerously subversive crime. Responses to sati were heterogeneous in this period, but generally it was understood as a freely chosen act of devotion and fidelity. The stories of its ancient origins aside, when discourses of punishment and atonement are raised in relation to sati it is usually with regard to the treatment of widows who survive their husbands, not those who burn

with them. While Banerjee acknowledges this difference, I do not think she gives it sufficient weight. Visual similarities notwithstanding, the assumption that direct correlations would be immediately apparent to the majority of observers is flawed, and those that did exist would have been counterbalanced by equally striking differences of meaning.

More telling, perhaps, would be comparisons between sati and the martyrdom of heretics. Indeed, Banerjee refers to this as the other great silence in the European discourse on sati. If this is so and if meaningful silences are to be sought, this one is significant, and I think her overall argument would have been strengthened by a more in-depth treatment of the potential crossings between sati and martyrdom. To treat one manifestation of European “woman-burning” without fully addressing its contemporaneous “other” raises a number of questions, the most important of which is, “did European observers avoid direct comparisons with witchcraft because they had at their

disposal a more appropriate analogy in martyrdom?” Many early modern observers did make explicit connections between martyrdom and sati. Henry Lord, writing in 1630, for example tells us that the sati “maketh herself a martyr to approve her love,”¹ while Edward Terry writes, “many young women are ambitious to die with honor (as they esteemed it), when their fiery love brings them to the flames (as they think) of martyrdom most willingly [. . .].”² By the second half of the eighteenth century, direct comparisons between satis and religious martyrs were being made,³ much earlier than the early twentieth century references to witch burning that Banerjee mentions (34). On this basis, I think that Banerjee’s silence on martyrdom is a telling one, and a more direct and detailed engagement with this issue might suggest a different context for the silences on witch burning that she critiques.

The above issues of interpretation aside, there is vastly more to praise than criticize in this book, and although I disagreed with her

reading of the material in places, within the context of her own conceptual framework the sophistication of the analysis and quality of the research could not be faulted. The areas prompting disagreement are still valuable contributions to the debate and play a productive role in provoking a more in-depth consideration of the complexities of pre-colonial attitudes to other cultures. Banerjee's research illuminates a number of interconnected areas, including medieval history (Indian and European), gender studies, and postcolonial studies as well as making an important contribution to ongoing debates about the processes of colonial knowledge formation. It is an important and engaging read, the significance of which goes far beyond the relatively specialized nature of her topic.

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Manners Of Each Sect, 1630.

² E. Terry, "A Voyage to East India," in *Early Travels In India, 1585-1619*, ed. William Foster (London: Oxford UP, 1921), p. 328.

³ See for example John MacDonald, *Memoirs Of An Eighteenth Century Footman, Travels 1745-1779*, (London: Routledge, 1927), p. 160, in which MacDonald writes "Why should I think this woman has done wrong? She has done this to obtain heaven and God's favour; and have not the greatest and most learned men in England and other Christian countries done the same, who had the Bible to direct them?" Similarly, John Holwell defends sati saying "[. . .]own history affords illustrious examples in both sexes of voluntary sacrifices by fire, because they would not subscribe even to a different mode of professing the same faith." John Zephaniah Holwell, "The Religious Tenets of the Gentoos" (1767), in *The British Discovery of Hinduism in The Eighteenth Century*, ed. P. J. Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970), p. 96.

END NOTES

¹ Henry Lord, *A Discovery Of Two Foreign Sects In The East Indies, Viz. The Sect Of Banians, The Ancient Inhabitants Of India And The Sect Of Persees, The Ancient Inhabitants Of Persia, Together With The Religion And*