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Religion, Health and the Hindu Woman in Mauritius: Ananda Devi's Le Voile de Draupadi

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Abstract

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This study will explore the theme of transculturation in Francophone Mauritian writing through a critical reading of the metaphor of 'le voile' in Ananda Devi's *Le Voile de Draupadi*. At one level, the study will examine the myth of Draupadi's veil within the cultural context of Hindu mythology and its interpretation and contribution to the constitution of a Hindu identity in Mauritius. At another level the reading of the veil will be juxtaposed against the wider linguistic and literary context of Francophone literatures where the term 'voile' takes on a different religious, cultural and political significance. Ananda Devi's narrative is a site of creative contestation and exposes the complex and dynamic nature of exclusion and marginality in the multi-lingual, multi-racial and multi-religious Mauritian society. The essay will argue that 'le voile', a metaphor for women's oppression in literary convention in Francophone writing, is translated by Ananda Devi into a metaphor for regenerative tension in the construction of a Hindu identity in Mauritius.

Published in 1993, *Le voile de Draupadi* relates the story of a young Hindu Mauritian woman, Anjali, whose only child Wynn is dying of meningitis. Anjali, educated and urbanised, is married to a successful Hindu lawyer, Dev. Faced with the tragedy, Dev and his family believe that the child could be saved if Anjali performed the firewalking ritual. The young woman is torn between her maternal grief and her disbelief in the rigid ritualistic traditions of Mauritian Hindu society. Her refusal to accept these practices stem from a variety of reasons, both conscious and unconscious: her socialisation in a progressive urban environment; her unhappy marriage; and her traumatic memories of a tragic incident in her family. Anjali and her brother, Shyam, had helplessly witnessed the fatal accident in which their cousin, Vasnathi, had killed herself while performing a fire sacrifice. But, Anjali's stubborn refusal to perform the ritual is viewed by a dominating Dev and his accusing family as tantamount to her refusal to save her own son. Pitted against the forceful patriarchy of the Hindu society that believes in the meek submission and unquestioning loyalty of a wife, Anjali finds herself isolated from Dev's family as well her own. The decision to perform or not to perform the fire sacrifice which is central to the construction of the novel's narrative tension takes Anjali on a voyage of self discovery and forces her to face her inner self and to question her fixed identity as mother of a sick child, wife of a successful

lawyer and daughter of a traditional Hindu woman. In recent years firewalking and Kavadi as surviving folk Hindu practices in migrant societies, like those in Singapore, Malaysia and the Reunion island, have been exoticised and submitted to the tourist gaze.[1] The narrative, through a critical review of the practice itself and the use of the metaphor of Draupadi's veil, detaches it from an Orientalist framework and places it within the larger issues of religion, health, gender and identity in postcolonial societies.

My reading of the veil metaphor in the narrative is anchored in the central theme of Wynn's sickness that draws our attention to the relation between religion and health in all cultures. In this narrative where religion, sickness and motherhood are closely intertwined, two aspects need to be explicated before we proceed any further. Firstly it would be useful to define the notion of womanhood within Hindu society (sub-continental or diasporic) in order to fully comprehend the gravity of Anjali's dilemma: 'Should she or should she not perform the fire sacrifice as a way of asking the divinities for the life of her dying son?' Secondly it is important to elucidate the complexities of Mauritian society where different forms of Hinduism as well as different religious practices integrate and complement each other especially in the matter of sickness and cure.

According to social and religious convention, a Hindu woman's auspiciousness is her unique virtue. This quality is defined exclusively by the living presence of her husband and her ability to bear and rear healthy children. Textual (scriptures) and anthropological studies, as well as the customary religious practices of women, have shown that the image that emerges as a norm is one of the woman as 'householder' (*grihasthini*). According to the textual tradition a woman fulfils her religious duty (*dharma*) only in as much as she devotes herself completely to her husband, home and family. The ideal woman modelled along the mythological characters of Sita and Draupadi, performs the prescribed rites, conforms to the self-sacrificing and self-denying image expected of her so that the health, prosperity and longevity of her husband, son and the entire lineage is ensured. Fieldwork studies have also shown that rituals, family rites, vows and fasts that constitute the core of a woman's religious practice are concerned mainly with the welfare of others.[2] The religiosity of the woman as householder rarely finds expressions of a more spiritual sort. The *dharma* of Hindu woman or her goal is to be a loyal and adaptable wife, in Anjali's words: 'une femme hindoue imbue à la fois de sa feminité, de sa fidelité et de sa flexibilité' ('a Hindu woman full of her own femininity, loyalty and adaptability') (26).[3]

Marital felicity (good husband, healthy children) and spiritual salvation or *moksa* are interlinked. The fulfilment of the ideal of a devoted wife is the key to her liberation. To pray that she will die a married woman is to pray for her *moksa*. Responsible for the well being of her family in this birth and in this world, she leaves her husband to deal with salvation, oneness with the divine and the more spiritual pursuits of Hinduism.[4] It goes without saying therefore that motherhood

as duty is also linked to a Hindu woman's path to salvation. Ethnographic studies have shown that it is difficult to distinguish between medicine, superstition and religion in rituals concerning pregnancy, childbirth and post natal care.[5] Traditional child care practices like the ritual bathing and adorning of the infant, stress close body contact between mother and baby. On the other hand, exorcising rites are often performed by women to protect both child and home from evil influences. Belief in medical science and in superstition continues to co-exist in the most emancipated of households. Two forms of Hinduism co-exist in all Hindu societies: popular Hinduism with its pantheon of divinities, rites of corporeal mortification and mystical cults, and a 'high tradition' of Hinduism based on sacred texts having a focus on non-violence, *karma* and ascetism. The former is often considered pejoratively by Western educated urban Hindu elites.[6] Immigrants to the labour islands who came from the South of India mainly practiced folk Hinduism. While in the Reunion islands Hinduism is almost exclusively Dravidian, in Mauritius such homogeneity does not exist. In his description of the island Jean Benoist says that 'L'Inde Mauricienne est une sorte de modèle reduit de toute l'Inde' ('Mauritius is a small-scale model of the subcontinent') (222). Both Hinduism and Islam were also introduced on the island by traders and coolies from the North. While high caste Brahmins and Sanskrit textual tradition were absent in Tamil Hinduism, castism was present in the group from North India and Brahmins and sacred scriptures played an important role in the maintenance of religious culture. Even today, the high caste 'maraz' officiates in North Indian temples and functions, and the 'poussari', non Brahmin Hindu is the Tamil priest. However when it comes to religious cure, the 'poussari', like the local Creole healer, plays an important role. Even the Non-Tamils call the 'poussari' to exorcise sickness thought to be caused by the 'evil eye'.

> Le rapport à la maladie et au soin est donc à Maurice comme dans les autres îles, le lieu privilégié d'une perméabilité interculturelle qui retentit sur les religions elles-mêmes, soit en menaçant leur orthodoxie soit en conduisant à un œcuménisme mauricien que pratiquent certains prêtres catholiques et des mouvement hindous'. (Benoist 223)

> The link to sickness and cure is, in Mauritius, as on other islands, the privileged space of intercultural interaction which has its effect on the religions themselves, either by threatening their orthodoxy or by producing a Mauritian syncretism that is practiced by some catholic priests and Hindu groups. (Benoist 223)

Benoist argues that in religion's rapport with sickness these complicated strands are interwoven and this relation becomes the privileged space for intercultural interaction. So, even if there is a huge gap in the practices of the two dominant forms of Hinduism, and even if popular practices are shunned by urban elites, these practices are sanctioned in matters of sickness (Benoist 226).

    Le Voile de Draupadi is truly representative of the complexities of the Hindu Mauritian society. In the novel, Devi uses 'pretre tamoul' or 'poussari' when referring to the men of God in the narrative, thus referring to the practice of Tamil

Hinduism. The central issue in the narrative. 'la marche sur le feu' (firewalking), is a Tamil Hindu practice on the island. On the other hand, there are indications in the text that prove that Anjali's ancestors may have come from the North of India. For example, the references to the Gita as the sacred text that Sanjiva, her grandfather, believed in, as well as the notion of *Kala Pani* which is a Hindi word (Hindi being the language spoken in the North of India). Dev and his family impose the fire sacrifice on Anjali as a last resort attempt to appease the Gods, and as Benoist argues, when it comes to sickness and cure, differences between religious practices disappear. Fatmah prays for her friend's child and even Matante Sec, the creole healer, pays Anjali a visit and performs an animal sacrifice on the request of Anjali's Creole servant, Marlène.

Anjali's non conformism, her disregard for the practice of folk Hinduism and her dismissal of the rite as a cheap bargaining with the Gods, can be read as the natural reaction of the urbanised, high cast and anglicised Hindu elite. On the other hand, the fact that it is imposed on her by her urban educated and progressive husband leads her to revolt against the image of a self denying Hindu married woman. Anjali cries with indignation:

> Et il préserve quant à lui cette image radieuse, auréolée d'une femme hindoue imbue à la fois de sa féminité, de sa fidélité et de sa flexibilité. Mon enfant est malade et il me demande l'impossible. (26)

> As for him, he preserves this radiant and hallowed image of a Hindu woman full of her femininity, loyalty and adaptability. My child is sick and he asks me to accomplish the impossible. (26)

She refuses to fulfil the prescribed role of wife which denies her the strength that motherhood attributes to her persona. The contrast between ('mon enfant') my child and he ('il') underlines the frustration of Anjali, the mother who is asked to do what she deems impossible (expectations of her husband and society) to save her child. To Anjali, therefore, it is the ultimate irony that that her *streedharma* (obedience to husband) has to be accomplished for her to save her motherhood. Her words of frustration, 'mère omnipotente, omniprésente, mais d'autres dieux règnent sur la mère, une autre servitude' ('omnipotent, omnipresent mother, but other Gods reign over the mother, another servitude') (40), recall the paradox that defines the social construction of womanhood in Hindu society. Anjali believes fervently in her 'foi de femme' ('woman's faith') (27) and her power as life giver, but will Dev and society consider that sufficient to save her child? Despite his urbane background, Dev seems to have blind faith in certain practices. This is in accordance with Benoist's thesis which argues that when it comes to sickness various strands of the same religious faith come together in a desperate recourse to save life. However, in Anjali's eyes, Dev is guilty of emotional blackmail. According to him, 'Une mère qui refuse de faire une offrande pour son fils, n'est pas une mère' ('a mother who refuses to make an offering to God for her son is not a mother') (24).

Initially, Anjali seems to suggest that she has lost faith in such practices because of her cousin's untimely death in a tragic accident. Vasanthi, in order to prove her love for Shyam, had naively attempted the fire sacrifice but she had been burnt to death. Anjali holds herself responsible for not having saved her. However, as the narrative progresses we realise that her death is not the real cause of Anjali's lost faith or guilt. The wild, uncultured and beautiful Vasanthi (Anjali's alter ego) had represented a woman's freedom from social conventions. Anjali knows that even if Vasanti had died, she had consciously chosen a path, while her own life, 'sans révolte, sans rebellion' ('without revolt, without rebellion') (100), monotonous but drearily comfortable in a marriage of convenience, had been built on a series of 'non-choices'. Anjali realises that 'Vasanthi had refused to become a labourer's wife. She had made a choice: 'Vasanti avait refusé d'être femme du laboureur. Elle avait fait un choix. Moi, j'avais fait un non choix. Je m'étais laissé faire' ('As for me, I had made a non-choice. I had let myself be talked into it') (114).

It is in her maternal bonding with Wynn that Anjali finds herself a new identity. 'Ce n'est qu'avec Wynn que je suis née' ('It is with Wynn that I was born') (9), she proclaims. Ironically his sickness reveals to her the meaningless nature of her status as Dev's wife. The faith in her motherhood gives her the strength to question her subordinate position in her relationship with her husband. Anjali, therefore, desperately wants to believe that the physiological connection between herself and her son would suffice to deliver him of his sickness/destiny. She tries anxiously to communicate to him that,

> C'est maintenant que nos deux chairs sont soudées, et tu tiendras bon... et je te laisserai tes mythes d'indépendance. (40)

> It is only now that our flesh is joined together and you will survive ... I will hand over your tales of freedom to you. (40)

At the outset she seems to pit a form of Occidentalised individualism and the collective religiosity of Hinduism against one another. In fact she is falling into the same trap that she accuses Dev and his friends of falling into — colonial mimesis, but she soon realises with the help of Fatimah that it could be a losing battle if she does not anchor her struggle within specific paradigms of belief. Prayer is universal virtue, but practice can be diverse. Despite trying her utmost to escape the confines of her condition as a woman in a Hindu society, Anjali realises that History (colonial) and Tradition (Hinduism) cannot be ignored, but this revelation occurs through her interaction with Fatmah. I argue that Ananda Devi subverts the literary convention of the veil as a metaphor of oppression in Islamic societies by positing Fatmah, the Muslim woman, as the metaphor of religious permeability. At another level, by transposing the veil metaphor on to another religious and cultural context, Anada Devi transforms the veil into a symbol that permits dialogue, a passage between traditions that does not deny the historicity of each

religious tradition but forces Anjali to think of her identity, not in terms of cultural syncretism, but in terms of a dialogic interaction or transculturation.

Generally speaking, the meanings attributed to the term veil/voile can be seen to have four aspects: the material, the spatial, the communicative, and the religious. In the process of translating dress codes and religious significations across cultures, especially between Islam and Christianity, the veil is analysed as an object with a universal meaning: seclusion on one hand, invisibility and oppression on the other. Scholars have argued that the European term veil/voile gives the illusion of having a common referent in Islamic culture while in actual fact it refers to face cover, head cover or elaborate headdress each of which could denote cultural differentiations of social context, class, rank and socio-political expression.[8] In Non Islamic, feminist, Orientalist discourse, the veil symbolises the subordination of Islamic women.

In the case of the novel under scrutiny, the veil/voile is used in yet another cultural tradition, Hinduism. Moslem women in India, like their sisters in the Arab world, are also familiar with the tradition of head, face and body cover. However, Devi specifically uses the term 'veil' in the context of Draupadi's heroine of the Hindu epic Mahabharata.[9] Draupadi is humiliated in public by the Kaurava prince Duryodhana as he attempts to disrobe her in front of everyone. Draupadi has no other recourse but to surrender herself completely to her divine faith. Lord Krishna comes to her rescue and saves her by providing her with a never ending piece of cloth to cover her body so that her modesty is not violated. This incident has served for centuries as a glorious example to Indian devotees of the supreme benefits of unflinching devotion and surrender to God. Draupadi's sari is perceived as symbolic of 'human faith' in the divine. What is truly original in the context of this study is the fact that no English translation uses the term veil to describe Draupadi's dress. Oft used terms are sari, cloth or garment. It cannot be denied that when worn by traditional Indian women the sari is a flexible dress and the end of the sari can also used to cover the face or the head for the sake of modesty or reverence. So why does Devi so provocatively entitle her story *Le Voile de Draupadi*?

In the story, the 'veil' is used in the context of the Hindu firewalking sacrifice.[10] According to some traditions, it is believed that the devotees are protected by the supreme Mother Goddess, Maha Devi, and hence can walk the fire pit without getting burnt. In some traditions followers believe that divine protection appears in the form of a fabric over the burning cinders that prevents the soles of the feet from burning. This protective cloth is believed to be none other than that which had preserved Draupadi's chastity and purity.

The first reference to the veil is made when Anjali meets Fatmah to share her dilemma with a compassionate friend. When she reflects on the possibility of her participation in the rite, she sees herself as a phantom in saffron coloured robes following the others to the fire pit to seek Draupadi's 'veil of femininity'. It is in

the dialogue between these two women that the veil is symbolically reappropriated into a framework that anchors its symbolism outside non-Islamic conceptions of veiling, concealing, and gender disempowerment. Fatmah is literally speaking unveiled. She is not in chador, and she has access to public space as Faisal's secretary, but is physically segregated from the rest of the household because of the cruel whim of the family matriarch and is therefore metaphorically veiled/ excluded. However she enjoys the seclusion and has re-appropriated her prison as a sanctuary to enjoy her privacy because she is no longer the object of public gaze. Her identity is solely dependant on her voice and agency. She says: 'En attendant de trouver la solution de mon énigme personnelle, j'attends, je patiente, je prie' ('While I await a solution to the riddle of my own identity, I stay, I hang on, I pray') (107). It is Fatmah who makes Anjali see the truth beyond the narrow issue of the fire sacrifice: that she cannot use her motherhood as a pretext to live or to die. Anjali becomes aware that tradition cannot be ignored but, more importantly, that its acceptance or its rejection has to be a conscious choice: 'Il y avait aussi des siècles de traditions qui en émergeaient et établissaient sur nous leur pouvoir. On les acceptait ou on les refusait, mais on ne pouvait pas les ignorer. C'était cet appel que j'entendais comme un son de cloches au fond de son regard' ('There were also centuries of traditions that emerged and established control over us. We accepted them or refused then, but we couldn't ignore them. It was this call that I heard like the sound of bells in the depth of her gaze') (108).

In order to discover her real 'foi de femme' ('woman's faith') Anjali would have to perform the sacrifice by considering it as an act of duty (*dharma*). She would have to embrace it as a mother's conscious duty (126), and not endure it passively as an imposition Consequently, she comes to grasp the fact that her duty ('devoir') can be transformed into a moment of self realisation:

> … tant qu'il aura un doute en moi, j'imaginerai encore que dans certains cas le sacrifice et la mortification sont les moyens les plus directs d'atteindre Dieu. Puisqu'il s'agit de mon fils, il y va de mon devoir, j'en suis responsable et j'en suis la gardienne, alors en dépit de mes croyances profondes, je me dis que je dois le faire…. (107)

> …as long as I have my doubts, I will still believe that in some cases, sacrifice and mortification are the most direct means to reach God. Since this concerns my son, it becomes my duty, I am responsible for him and I am his guardian, so despite my fervent beliefs, I tell myself that I must do it…. (107)

But the road to self discovery is painful. The ritual fasting depletes Anjali physically and she verges on hysteria. She purposefully takes the fast to such an extreme point in the hope that her weakened, anorexic body will not survive after the fire sacrifice. Fatmah once again helps her to see that such an act of abnegation is selfish and cowardly and that by giving up even before accomplishing the act, she is making the act meaningless. Fatmah's words are also echoed by the Hindu priest who advises Anjali that fasting is not an act of denial but an act of self-control: Le refus de la souffrance est une lâcheté et une faiblesse. Prenez-la et

faites — en une force, pour aider les autres, pour vous aider vous- mêmes' ('To decline suffering is an act of cowardice and weakness. Accept it and make it your strength to help others and yourselves') (159) .

The memory of Vasanti and her faith brings Anjali to her senses. Much to her family's pride, she walks across the fire 'successfully' and discovers that 'the translucent veil' ('le voile translucide') (168) is in fact only a narrow and unsteady passage ('un passage étroit et mouvant') (168). She discovers that there is no mysticism in the act of abnegation and if anything it is a selfish act. She no longer feels guilty of having abandoned Vasanthi and neither does she feel guilty about not having accomplished her duty as a mother. The following quotation reflects Anjali's new awareness of her Self as mother and wife:

> Nous sommes autant à blâmer pour nos actes que pour notre inaction. Pour les paroles prononcées que pour celles qui demeurent informulées. Pour ce noyau de haine qui , en nous , fait naître des cruautés et des trahisons, d'inconscients égoïsmes, alors que d'autre part, nous sommes capables de plus puissantes abnégations, d'offrir notre être et notre essence sur nos paumes tendues, pour une divinité, pour un enfant, pour un homme. Et parfois, les deux choses se mélangent, et l'acte d'abnégation est en vérité le plus pur des égoïsmes. (114)

> We are as much to blame for our acts as for our inaction. As much for the pronounced words as those that remain unarticulated. As much for this core of hate which begets cruelties and betrayals and thoughtless selfishness in us, whereas on the other hand, we are capable of the most fervent acts of self sacrifice, of offering our being and our essence on our outstretched palms, for a divinity, for a child, for a man. And sometimes, the two get muddled and the act of self-sacrifice becomes, in reality, an act of sheer selfishness. (114)

Through her interaction with Fatmah and her participation in the ritual of the fire sacrifice, Anjali converts the veil, metaphor for passive femininity, into a metaphor for woman's regeneration. Here one is reminded of the episode in *Ramayana*, rarely reinforced in popular tradition, when Sita proclaims after proving her innocence that she prefers to leave her husband to his stately duties and retreat into the forest to live a life of asceticism. Anjali's sense of liberation is firmly anchored in the Sanskritist tradition of *maya* and *dharma*. Comparing the labyrinth in Greek mythology to the life as *maya* or illusion in Hindu mythology, a liberated Anjali declares that if destiny is perceived as tragic by human beings it is because they attribute a sense of seriousness to their acts without realising that life is a game. Ariane's thread and Draupadi's sari, she says, are constant reminders that the dilemmas and indecisions of humanity are eventually insignificant:

> Il suffit de savoir que chaque labyrinthe à son fil d'Ariane, ce sari sans fin de Draupadi, pour nous rendre compte que nos dilemmes et nos indécisions sont risibles. D'une façon ou d'une autre chacun est occupé à perpétuer son *karma,* à suivre son fil invisible à travers le temps. Si notre destin nous semble tragique, c'est que nous attribuons à nos actes une gravité qui n'y est pas. C'est qu'il nous arrive, parfois, de refuser de jouer le jeu. (160)

It is sufficient to know that every labyrinth has its Ariane's thread, this never-ending sari of Draupadi, to make us see that our dilemmas and indecisions are ridiculous. In one way or the other, everyone is busy perpetuating his *karma*, following his invisible thread across time. If our destiny appears tragic to us, it is because we attribute seriousness to our acts where there is none. Sometimes, we refuse to play the game.

(160)

On a larger plane, as suggested earlier, given that the text is inserted within the literary space of francophone texts where the veil as garment is employed uniquely in the context of Islamic womanhood, Devi's text demystifies the usage and unveils the falseness of the debate. Anjali observes: J'ai vu le voile de Draupadi, J'ai marché sur le feu sans me brûler. Il ne me demeure aucun enchantement mystique. Je l'ai fait comme si je passais un examen J'ai pénétré un monde, qui n'est pas le mien, à présent je retourne à l'intérieur de moi-même, rien n'est résolu , rien n'est expliqué ('I saw Draupadi's veil, I walked on fire without burning myself. There is no mystical enchantment left. I did it as though I was taking a test, I entered a world that is not mine, now, I am returning to my inner self, nothing is resolved, nothing is explained') (169). In the end, she loses Wynn but Anjali emerges from the ordeal, which was both social (religious) and personal (maternal), with a strong sense of identity. Performing the sacrifice has taught her that she can construct her identity within her Hindu tradition and at the same time outside the confining limits of the three aspects fundamental to the definition of femininity in Hindu society: wifehood, motherhood and religious dogmatism. The narrative thus defines Anjali's identity within a universal conception of humanity but outside Orientalist definitions of non-Western womanhood. Devi 'tears' the metaphor of the veil associated with oppression in Islamic societies from the framework of non-Islamic conceptions of womanhood and religiosity by rewriting its significance for the urban educated, progressive and self-reflective women in previously colonised societies. In *Le Voile de Draupadi* a new Hindu identity is lived 'in dialogue' with other cultures in contact, conflict and convergence. Ananda Devi stresses the importance of religion (philosophy and practice) in the construction of post-colonial subjectivity. She suggests the possibility of finding emancipation within different cultural and religious paradigms. By highlighting the differences between oppressive tradition and individual practice in different cultures, Devi, on the one hand, denounces religious dogmatism as a patriarchal construction and on the other, calls for a plurality of womanhoods.

Anjali's history is rooted in the history of colonialism in Mauritius. As a descendant of the coolies brought in by the British from India as workers on the sugar plantations on the island, her Hindu identity in postcolonial Mauritius is a tradition she cannot ignore. In the same way, being locked into a self Orientalising view of her Self as she struggles to find the meaning to her existence within societal conventions and religious practices of which she disapproves, is also an integral part of the colonial heritage. Devi succinctly describes the 'postcolonial predicament' of the island nation. In Mauritius, she says, Mauritian identity is

orientated towards religions, especially in their collective aspect. This contributes to cohesion within each group but at the same time becomes the basis of separation between groups.[11] The multicultural model in postcolonial Mauritius is commended by critics like Francoise Lionnet,[12] who work on concepts of transculturation and métissage in order to present a harmonious co-existence of multiple religions and languages. Devi interrogates the island identity differently without ignoring the historicity of the social and religious construction of identities, and at the same time she imbricates the notions of class and gender in the evolving construction of knowledge that shapes the present. Arguably, the discourse and practice of Orientalism exemplifies the 'postcolonial predicament' both in ex-colonised and ex-colonising societies. Van der Veer and Breckenridge note that 'one aspect of the postcolonial predicament is that critiques of colonialism have not really led to a reflection on the evolution of knowledge that brings us into the postcolonial (neo-colonial) present' (2). Devi's work brings into focus this lacuna. It reveals that in postcolonial societies identity formation is not a syncretic progression but a regenerative conundrum.

NOTES

[1]   See Sahadeo (1974); Vertovec (1993, 1996)

[2]   See Julia Leslie *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, Rehana Ghadially(ed) *Women in Indian Society.*

[3]   All translations into English are mine. The page number corresponds to the original edition in French: *Le voile de Draupadi*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993.

[4]   See Julia Leslie, *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women.*

[5]   See Julia Leslie and Mary MacGee (eds), *Invented Identities*; Susan Seymour, *Women, Family and Childcare: A World in Transition.*

[6]   In Creole societies like those found in Reunion and in the Caribbean islands the two forms are woven together in a continuum and Jean Benoist in *Hindouismes Créoles: Mascereignes, Antilles* argues that this is what gives it its unique identity in these regions. The majority of the immigrants in Reunion are from the South of India. They identify themselves quite differently from the Hindus of North India. In what Benoist calls 'hindouism tamoul' in the Creole islands, Brahmins do not play an important part and high castes are absent amongst the devotees. Tamil is used instead of Sanskrit in temple functions and the gap between this form of lived religion and the Sanskrit textual tradition has had the effect of relegating the classic Hindu concepts of *karma, dharma and moksa* to a secondary/negligible level. In fact Tamil Saivism is being constructed as an alternative to Sanskrit Hinduism in the Creole diaspora.

[7]   The material aspect of the veil refers commonly to the woman's head, face or body cover, that could include a netting attached to a hat, or part of the nun's head dress that frames the face; the spatial aspect: the veil could refer to a screen dividing physical/ social space; the communicative aspect of the term suggests concealing and invisibility; and the religious aspect refers to seclusion from worldly life and sexual pleasures.

[8]   See El Guindi Fadwa, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*, and Walther Weibke, *Women in Islam*. Fanon had argued that colonialism produced a new symbolism. In

French Algeria, the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria; it became part of the colonising strategy to uproot and control, but the opposite effect was produced — the movement strengthened the Arabs' attachment to the veil. The veil in contemporary societies is seen by Islamic women as a fierce symbol of nationalism and resistance. In Islamic societies the veil in the twentieth century has thus become a symbol of resistance and tradition in the struggle against occupation, and more recently as a symbol of resistance against Western imperialism, while the 'West' continues to see it in terms of exclusion and subordination of women. Most contemporary Islamic feminists believe that gender emancipation can be achieved only when the feminists are rooted in their own culture.

[9] The righteous prince, Yudhistra, the eldest of the five Pandava brothers had staked his kingdom and all his possessions in a game of dice against his rivals and cousins the Kauravas. Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava prince with the connivance of Sakuni, his uncle, beat Yudhistra. The Pandava prince was therefore asked to surrender Draupadi, wife of the five princes, to the Kauravas as their slave.

[10] A form of folk Hinduism, the practice was banned by the British India. While one rarely witnesses this ritual in urban India, it persists in parts of rural Tamil Nadu and in those ex-colonies where Indian indentured labour was brought in by the British as in Malaysia, Fiji, Mauritius, Reunion and so on. The devotees have to go through a period of preparation before performing the rite. For ten days before the penance, devotees fast, pray and deny themselves any form of bodily comfort in order to concentrate their mind on spiritual things.

[11] 'Aborder ces sujets était naturel, puisque la pensée mauricienne est orientée vers les religions, en particulier dans leur aspect collectif, qui constitue à la fois une force de cohésion à l'intérieur des groupes et une base de séparation entre les groupes. J'avais envie, encore une fois, de dénoncer ce rôle intégriste des religions et de montrer qu'il y avait d'autres possibilités d'interrogations. (Quand je dis ' dénoncer ', ' montrer ', je ne veux pas dire que ces romans ont été écrits pour cela; mais le thème central du *Voile...* était justement ce dilemme entre le collectif et la croyance individuelle...)' Patrick Sultan, 'Ruptures et héritages: Entretien avec Ananda Devi', (online).

[12] See Françoise Lionnet, 'Logiques Métisses'.

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