

Denison Journal of Religion

Volume 3

Article 3

2003

Sisters in Sorrow and Durga's Incarnations: the double-edged sword of shakti

Sarah Pyle
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion>

 Part of the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pyle, Sarah (2003) "Sisters in Sorrow and Durga's Incarnations: the double-edged sword of shakti," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol3/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Denison Journal of Religion by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Sisters in Sorrow and Durga's Incarnations: the double-edged sword of *shakti*

Sarah Pyle

“avatum pennale, alivatum pennale”

–Tamil proverb

As an American woman, it seems that dealing with current controversial women's issues, for example abortion, women in the military or prostitution, is in itself a complex task. But what happens when I expand my lens to explore women's roles and rights within a different social context? How do Hindu women experience “womanhood”? Gender is socially constructed, meaning that the reality that an individual experiences is shaped by the definitions of her social context, and how that context designates roles and rights based on sex. If gender is socially constructed, then gender would likely not be experienced in the same ways universally. This essay seeks to take a closer look at the way Hindu women are shaped by their social context. Beyond that, I wish to delve into the social symbols and metaphors that are responsible for shaping Hindu womanhood.

Theologian Sallie McFague describes the way that language defines the material and ideological climate of reality in any culture. It is language that shapes our understanding of gender within a culture. Of course, language varies from culture to culture and this is why there is no universal understanding of what it means to be a woman. From a western perspective, there is a tendency to hold other societies accountable to our ethnocentric definitions of human rights and fair treatment. Looking specifically at the Hindu culture of India, there is ample evidence that women are unjustly, even inhumanely treated. One tends not to consider social constructions within the context of the society within which they are created. But it is vital to understand the foundations of social constructions, in this case the social construction of Hindu women in India. This is because only once one understands a society and its people can

one make judgments as to what is and is not just and humane without forcing intellectual imperialism upon a culture that is misunderstood.

It proves to be especially challenging, for me as a western woman, to delve into the social constructions of the Hindu woman. I am writing this paper from the point of view of a twenty-one-year-old American woman. My perspective on Hindu women is also undoubtedly affected by my studies of the Christian theologies of Sallie McFague, and the assumptions, which I will explain here, that I have gained from my studies. Her book *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God and Religious Language* is particularly relevant as she points to the ways in which language is foundational to religious worlds. Therefore we must examine and analyze a culture's understanding of "God," as that understanding reflects the culture itself. This theory is vital in looking beyond one's own culture while observing that it is shaped by religion. As this essay will reveal, McFague's message that the language we use when we talk and think about God is profoundly related to the way we perceive and treat each other. For example, talking about "God the Father" in the Christian religious world has profound ramifications on gender divisions because God is portrayed as a man. One goal of this paper is to continue to consider how the way Hindus think and talk and interact with God(s) shapes the way Hindu men and women think and talk and interact with one another.

In some respects Hinduism seems to be gender-equal; for example Hindus posit the viability for women to be perceived as divine. However, there also is a contradictory reality where women are expected to subordinate themselves as part of their religious obligation. There is a Tamil proverb which states: "avatam penale, alivatum pennale," meaning "through woman is being and through woman is downfall" (Madan 67). This proverb embodies the paradoxical nature of the Hindu woman who is simultaneously revered for her ability to create, but then scorned for her ability to destroy. She holds the power of responsibilities that make her revered but also disdained. We see further contradictions when we investigate of Hindu tenets, which dictate the social ideals pertaining to the feminine, which in effect construct what is "woman." These tenets offer contradictory metaphors manifested in Hindu imagery and literature, creating an ambiguous and confusing designation for Hindu women. Some metaphors for the Hindu woman depict the feminine as empowered, fulfilling crucial functions in the maintenance of cosmic order by driving out evil and ignorance. Some of these portrayals even reveal women to be of superior power and strength to men. However, there are also metaphors that point to an oppressive patriarchal hegemony that subordinates women.

This contradiction seems best manifested in the images of two deities: Sita and Durga. Sita represents a feminine ideal of *stridharma*, total devotion of a woman's life to the well-being and happiness of her husband and the submissive sacrifice of her own contentment. Durga, in seeming opposition, is independent and even superior to all men. She is a powerful goddess who maintains cosmic order by slaying evil and ignorance. Sita seems to be a victim of oppression while Durga is independent and empowered. Does each deity demonstrate only some aspects of the Hindu woman, making it possible for Sita and Durga to coexist together as an entire woman? Or are they mutually exclusive? In attempting to reconcile the seemingly contradictory metaphors of women, my goal in this essay is to reach an understanding about the way that symbols and metaphors, within a Hindu context, function once applied to social reality. In turn I would like to observe the way that social realities might inform the function of symbols and metaphors. Do "injustices" exist not as patriarchal oppression but as reflections of a higher cosmic order? In answering these questions, why is it also that some Hindu women remain silent victims of what is potentially social oppression? Perhaps they do not perceive themselves to be oppressed. Yet there are others who identify a need to break free from a subordinated social construction through social reformation. How can this polarity be reconciled?

***Stridharma*: the social location of women's value**

Dharma is a foundational aspect in defining the Hindu religious world. It is also vital to understanding the social construction of the person, for it dictates one's role within society. For the purpose of this paper an exploration of the social construction of *dharma* for women is particularly relevant for understanding their location within Hindu society. *Dharma* is hard to translate, but it is a sense of order, an assurance that things are not random. It is each person's specific obligations, roles and duties, both ethical and religious, hinged upon their identity, for example gender, age, *jati*, *varna* and caste. *Dharma* determines what is right or wrong, acceptable or not, obligatory or insignificant, in a way that is not universal, rather varying from person to person. One's ability to fulfill one's *dharma* is vital to the maintenance of cosmic order. Therefore one is valued not on one's ability to obey a monistic sense of morality, but on one's ability to conform to one's *dharma*. This allows for a pluralism of right and wrong, good and evil, but is specific in defining morality for an individual. The need to preserve *dharma* through alignment with one's religious and ethical

obligations creates interesting repercussions as far as its ability to reinforce a social norm and disallow much possibility to diverge from this cosmic order.

The social norms and constructs for women are the by-products of *stridharma*, a woman's *dharma*. This creates a powerful ideology about a feminine ideal, which is pervasive in Hindu society. Mary McGee touches on the persistent aspect of *stridharma* as manifested in women's votive rights in her article "Desired Fruits: Motives and Intention in the Votive Rights of Hindu Women." The *nitya* rituals are "duty-born" rituals, which implies that they are obligatory and also performed without desire. Women perform *nitya* duties as a vital part of their female roles of wife and mother. Women practice these rites because they are the essential means for the fulfillment of their *dharma*. Men practice votive rights to attain *moksha*: they are the means for personally acquiring liberation. Women are not granted such access to liberation. According to the religious law (*dharmasastra*), liberation for women is available only after she is reborn as a man. Thus, attainment of liberation is gradual, *kramamukti*, and the extent to which she can achieve a life of right conduct and moral perfection is bound to the fulfillment of her *dharma*. A woman's first and foremost *dharma* is to be a devoted wife. Her duties and devotion are only to perpetuate the well-being of her husband. When a woman performs these rites her intentions are primarily to promote marital happiness, the health and longevity of her husband, the health and longevity of her children, and hopes of her own male progeny. These intentions are her greatest concerns, taking priority above her own health, wealth, her relationship to God, and liberation or *moksha*. This is how a woman correctly performs her *dharma*. Mary McGee concludes, "this is [...] the *dharma* of a Hindu woman: to devote her life and actions to her husband; in other words, to live for him" (McGee 78). According to *stridharma*, a woman is defined not as an independent individual, but within the context of her essential role in the family.

This concept of *dharma* breeds an inherent sense of hierarchy and hegemony in Hindu society. Manifestations of such hierarchical systems are caste divisions as well as the obedience and submission of women to men. With regards to women's issues this also places a high value upon a woman's need to be a wife and mother to coincide with not only social norms, but also a higher moral order and religious obligation. Integrating *stridharma* into an understanding of Hindu women is crucial to untangling some of the complexity and ambivalence which surround issues of women's power or their subordination. Could it be that such complete devotion and sacrifice to one's husband is indicative of an oppressive

patriarchal system? Within a religious context it is harder to discern if women are socially devalued or if their obedience to a higher moral obligation at the sacrifice of self is something empowering and admirable.

Sita and the Feminine Ideal: a model of consent or coercion?

The story of Sita and Rama as told in the *Ramayana* is very revealing of traditional conceptions of the feminine ideal. Rama's wife Sita is one role model of Hindu women. It is further revealing to see the way in which women identify with Sita and criticize Rama as evidence of women's dissatisfaction, but compliance with *stridharma*. When women tell the story of Rama and Sita they focus almost entirely upon Sita as the universal woman whose life represents themes central to women, as well as a harsh social reality they must endure. Nabaneeta Dev Sen talks about the union of the sisters in sorrow, describing that in the Indian's women's folk tradition no matter a woman's age, location within the subcontinent, language, or political designation, they are instantly united when they sing the songs of Rama and Sita. "Sita is a figure closer to home, the girl next door, a person they know too well, a woman whose pain they can share. She is not part of the elite and she never rebels. She symbolizes sacrifice, a woman's greatest virtue according to patriarchal traditions" (Sen 220). These women, like Sita, suffer silently, knowing not to challenge men in their songs, just as Sita does not challenge Rama. Their relief comes from the union formed in singing of the experiences women share.

The *Ramayana* tells of the marriage between Sita and Rama. Rama is an *avatara* of Vishnu, "the preserver," and he is described as "the best of men" and the "ideal son." However, the songs of the sisters in sorrow focus on Sita and in Sita's defense expose the travesty of Rama's later misdeeds against Sita. Some songs even refer to Rama as "stone-hearted" or "the sinner." Their songs focus on the milestones of Sita's life, as they are universal to every woman, and interestingly these themes are fiercely tied to themes of abandonment, violence, victimization, and loneliness as well as romance, marriage, injustice and pregnancy. This indicates how these women feel that these are natural elements of a woman's life, as natural as puberty or childbearing. It also demonstrates that while these women are "sorrowful" for their condition, they recognize this is a reality they must endure, not overturn.

The songs concentrate on Sita the orphan, not Sita the princess. This is metaphorical for a woman's feelings of loneliness, abandonment, and being unloved. Interestingly enough, early on in Sita's life, as her adoptive parents

seek a worthy husband for their daughter, she exhibits extreme physical strength when one day she is cleaning and she lifts Shiva's bow with one hand to sweep underneath it. Her father, who has never seen anyone move the bow before, laments, for a husband must be stronger than his wife and Sita has shown more strength than any man he has ever seen. He worries that she will remain unmarried. This is interesting for two reasons. One, this scene proves how women can possess extraordinary strength yet they are forbidden by social restrictions to embrace their power. Two, her father's reaction is not one of awe and respect for her strength, rather one of fear that her power will force her to be outside social normalcy. It is not a woman's strength that is valued but her marital status. Sita does finally marry, though, when Rama successfully lifts the bow.

The songs then turn to the reality of being a child bride, which not only requires the social responsibility of being a wife when one is so young that they can barely care for herself, but also a bride's *sasurbas*. There are many songs that deal with Sita's *sasurbas*, stories of how her mother-in-law would torture and abuse physically and emotionally. Among other abuses, Sita is starved and restricted from being able to wash and care for herself. Of course, Sita continues to suffer in silence and she does not complain, modeling a feminine ideal to be imitated by Hindu women. After being abducted by Ravana but then rescued, Sita is forced to undergo trial by fire to test her chastity. This story has several significant parts.

First is the way in which Ravana deceived Sita. Sita had ventured into the forest seeking the golden deer (her reasons for doing so differ according to regional tellings) and encounters Ravana disguised as a *sadhu*, a holy renouncer. Sita is standing within a number of magical concentric circles which her brother-in-law has instructed will protect her. But if she steps outside the circles she will be abducted. Sita has sent both her brother-in-law and Rama to chase after the deer. She is all alone when the *sadhu* approaches and explains that if she leaves the center of the concentric circles that she will have a son for each circle she crosses. Without further consideration Sita crosses every circle, risking abduction. This reveals not only the dire importance and pressure a woman feels to give birth to sons, but also shows the hierarchical nature of the value of life. To please her husband and bear sons Sita was more than willing to risk possible abduction. Her life is of lesser value than that of her husband or the prospect of sons.

Second, after Sita is rescued from Ravana she is forced to prove her purity through a fire ordeal. This shows how women who are actually victims of vio-

lence, abduction, and/or rape are blamed rather than supported. Sita's chastity is proven by the fire ordeal and she and Rama spend a romantic evening together where she is impregnated. However, Rama's subjects continue to gossip and ridicule Rama for taking back his impure wife. Rama then abandons Sita by exiling her to the forest even though she is in the advanced stages of pregnancy.

This is a third and significant aspect to Sita's story. Not only is she abandoned in the forest, but also she is five months pregnant. She is lonely and humiliated but even as she prepares to go into exile her thoughts are only of Rama. She makes sure that his clothes will be laundered, that he will be well-fed, that his bath will be filled daily, and that his lamp will have oil. Even as he has abandoned her, she will not abandon her wifely duties to Rama.

While in exile she continues to think of Rama and soon she gives birth to their twin sons. Her exile is the final aspect to be discussed here because it bears important symbolism that is reflective of women's conditions according to the sisters of sorrow songs. Sita's exile is figurative for women's disempowerment, their denial of rights and their alienation from society.

These songs are significant to understanding Hindu women because they divulge a definite message that women consider themselves victims of abandonment, neglect, denial of rights and loneliness. Here the feminine ideal is displayed vividly. Women's lives and identities are defined by being married and bearing sons. This is clearly not a reality that empowers women; rather women are only empowered in their shared suffering. These songs also divulge the resignation towards this reality that women feel, suggesting that they are voiceless in trying to change reality. Or perhaps they show that women might recognize that to suffer this sorrow is to fulfill a woman's role. These songs do not call out for equality and justice, rather they disclose a woman's consent, rather than coercion, to a reality full of sorrow.

There are contradictory notions of Sita however, that reveal her to be emblematic of women's strength and empowerment. In the songs of the sisters of sorrow we see how Sita is the epitome of the feminine ideal through her incredible wifely devotion. She took on very different connotations when Mahatma Gandhi decided to use Sita's influence as the most popular icon and most influential role model for women, to promote women's strength. By focusing on very different aspects of Sita's story than those highlighted by the sisters of sorrow, Sita was virtually recreated into the picture of strength and self-sufficiency. Gandhi reminded women of how Ravana wouldn't touch Sita against her will, saying that Sita was "no slave to Rama" (Kishwar 31). Sita did not require the

assistance of Rama, in fact, she had the ability to protect herself, making her autonomous from men. Sita even would say "no" to Rama if she was not interested in his sexual propositions, meaning she did not have to sacrifice her own will for the will of her husband. Madhu Kishwar refers to Gandhi's use of Sita to voice the following message: "women have the right to define and follow their own *dharma* (code of morality) rather than be constricted to wifehood."

The consequence of Gandhi's message was an upsurge of women leaving their confinement to their homes to step into the political arena. Gandhi's objective was to incite a movement of women who would follow this "renewed" model of Sita, the independent woman free to leave the boundaries of a domestic life to participate in the resistance against the colonized economy of India. Gandhi also wanted to teach the message of peace, again using Sita as the manifestation of non-violence. Sita's truth and purity gave her the ability to rise above Rama's oppression. In fact, it was her purity that protected her against Ravana. By bringing Sita into the political foreground as an icon of strength, independence, and power in truth and purity, Gandhi achieved many important steps relevant to the location of women within Hindu society today. Suddenly women were encouraged to step outside social norms. They were empowered to take up a social and political cause. Women were encouraged to redefine *dharma*, not as contingent upon the well-being of their husbands, but as their own moral code. This represents not only a different Sita than the one of the songs of the sisters in sorrow, but it represents a change in women. Additionally it represents a rejection of the traditional understanding of *stridharma*, whether or not it was oppressive to women.

These two rather conflicting interpretations of Sita raise questions surrounding tradition and change as facilitated by the flexibility allotted, within the dynamism of Hinduism, to create and recreate gods and goddesses into entities that serves a specific social purpose: in this case to incite women's independence. Once again this reminds us to consider the way in which gender is created: it is a social construction. The closer we come to understanding possible injustices embedded within socially created norms the closer we come to determining whether Hindu women feel victimized by oppression or empowered by religious duty.

Shakti, Durga and other Powerful Goddesses

Gandhi's movement is one example of contemporary Hindu women achieving empowerment, gaining autonomy from men and willingness to define their *dharma* by their own sense of moral codes, allowing their arrival in the

social and political fora. However, women all over India still remain sisters in sorrow, singing of Sita's abandonment and suffering. In fact, the songs, recently collected between 1950 and 1997 in Nabaneeta Dev Sen's article entitled "Sisters in Sorrow," indicate that their "sorrow" is still very present. Additionally, many social norms still exist which, at least by western feminist standards, are verification that huge injustices against women are present even today. It seems possible that while there are contemporary forces that influence a need for equality and these forces provoke women to be dissatisfied with their stringent *stridharma* roles to be domestic and "live for their husbands," as McGee suggested. One such force might be Gandhi's movement to de-colonize India's economy which brought an influx of western standards. At the other end of the continuum, perhaps the women who suffer patriarchal injustices quietly without protest are examples of where tradition has remained intact, where *stridharma* thrives. The theory, that McGee presents, is that the invasion of contemporary forces was more effective in undermining traditional concepts of women in some places than others. The result is differing reactions to women's acceptance or rejection of *stridharma* and the self-sacrificing, silent-suffering model of Sita. The largest factor, which would seem to disprove the viability of this theory, is that even traditional Hinduism incorporates amazing, inspirational icons of extraordinary feminine strength, power and independence from men. So the question remains, why do Hindu women, who feel victimized, subordinated, and suppressed by traditional patriarchal social norms, not feel compelled towards their own independence when their religion offers awesome images of women's empowerment? It also demands a more complex question: how can the same religion that binds women's worth to their husbands also provide such role models for women's strength and power?

Shakti is a concept that is foundational to Hinduism, but also to a Hindu understanding of women. *Shakti* is feminine creative energy and it is believed to be the energizing power that infuses all that is divine, every human, and every thing. This energy is personified when it is incarnated in the forms of numerous goddess forms. The most encompassing of these goddesses is *Devi*. She may manifest herself in different forms, with various names in various places, but she always possesses *shakti*, the incredible power to give and to take life.

The result of such extraordinary capacity to create but also to destroy is a mystique that surrounds Hindu women. There is a sense that they must be revered, but also feared. This *shakti* is a power that all women possess. T.N. Madan speaks to the ways in which *shakti* defines a woman within the context

of the home: "woman is the nucleus of the family, the source of energy, well-being and bliss for all its members" (72). Of course, one can assume that while great respect of women can be generated from such power to provide her family with well-being, comfort, and health, there is also great potential for this power to be dangerous for a woman should her family encounter sickness, hunger, or misery. It rests the responsibility of downfall upon the shoulders of the woman alone. It is clear, then, that this vital tenet of Hinduism could help explain the complexity surrounding women as simultaneously empowered and powerless. It would be very hard for a woman to embrace such power knowing the impossible responsibility it assumes.

Parts of the *Devi Bhagavata* provide another piece that makes up the complex perspective of women in Hindu society. These segments also imply notions similar to the concept of *shakti* pointing to a certain dangerous power women have over men. These descriptions indicate that women are evil because "inherently carnal" and their sexuality is so potent that it renders men helpless. The *Devi Bhagavata* says: "Women constantly suck the blood of men like leeches rob him of his manhood through sexual indulgence and of his mind, his wealth and all his possessions. Hence is there any greater robber than a woman?" (Baig). This statement reveals the complexity surrounding the Hindu woman. She is so carnally persuasive and powerful that men cannot help themselves. Men are powerless. This relationship translates into a conclusion that women, then, in the words of Tara Ali Baig, are evil. Again, this "power" women hold is a danger to them. They are to blame for men's actions, even if those actions violate women.

To further complicate the perceptions of Hindu women, let us look at the manifestations of Devi. These goddesses, like Durga and Kali, offer complex and seemingly (at least to the western eye) contradictory characteristics. Durga, the patron goddess of kings and warriors, is a foreboding, frightening and fearsome goddess. She successfully slays a demon that none of the male deities could kill, suggesting that her power surpasses that of all the gods. She has sixteen arms and each one clutches a weapon: the weapons are used not only to destroy evil demons, but also to drive out ignorance. She is violent, but in depictions her face is always very calm and peaceful reminding us that she is not ferocious when we concur with her. Durga is stronger than all the gods and she is responsible for maintaining cosmic balance by destroying evil and ignorance. She is worshipped, as a patron goddess, by kings and warriors, which conveys the way that men show awe and reverence for women. This intricate web of violence,

justice, respect, and fear surrounding Durga is a manifestation of the Hindu woman, as she is defined by men, other women and herself (Kinsley).

When Durga is confronted with a demon she cannot slay, Kali is born out of her forehead, created by Durga's focused concentration. Kali is also dark and fierce. She feeds on blood and wears necklaces, bracelets, and anklets made from the skulls of the demons she has killed. Although she is violent, she is known as a tender, compassionate protector. She is even considered to be maternal in the way that a mother would do anything to protect her children (Kinsley). The deities and Devi, in her transcendent form, represent a strange collection of characteristics. The goddess is the preserver of ultimate cosmic balance. She is a violent, fearsome warrior, but a tender, compassionate mother. She is feared and she is venerated. What then can we conclude from these seemingly contradictory portrayals of Hindu women? It seems that such inconsistencies would explain how women simultaneously are empowered and powerless. Perhaps, additionally, this accounts for different conceptualizations of what constitutes injustice against women. This might be why some women feel victimized and remain silent sufferers, why some women feel they should abide by their *stridharma*, and why still others are outraged by their condition within Hindu society and are prepared to overturn it.

The Indian feminist Madhu Kishwar says, "any woman who manifests extraordinary strength and is believed to be her own mistress and totally unafraid of men begins to be treated with special awe and reverence, often commanding unconditional obedience in her own milieu and treated as a manifestation of the goddess Durga" (28). This statement makes clear reference to the social truths that dictate how characteristics of strength, independence from men, and courageousness can garner extreme respect and admiration. This means that these are, at least to some, aspirations in achieving ultimate femininity. India's first woman Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, for example, was considered by many to be an incarnation of Durga. Kishwar also speaks of Kiran Bedi, India's first woman police officer, who "projects the image of a woman who can outperform men in every way and is fearless even in dealing with criminals," and is therefore referred to as an incarnation of Durga. To be fearless, to outperform men, to be powerful: these attributes are regarded so highly that they indicate human beings are descendants of these amazing goddesses. It seems then, logically, that these goddesses, and these women who have attained aspects of these goddesses, would be inspirations in empowering women.

Perhaps these women, Indira Gandhi, Kiran Bedi, even Durga herself, are considered anomalies, thus unattainable: worthy of worship and praise, yet unattainable from within the social degradation of Indian women. They represent a possibility to deviate from social norms but their deviation seems to require a rejection of *stridharma*. For example, there are powerful religious cults that encourage women to desert the social norm of matrimony by either leaving their husbands or remaining unwed as a means of liberation. Kishwar remarks about these women who rose "above all social constraints imposed on women in the name of family honor. The nudity some of them practiced was an assertion of their refusal to abide by social norms and conventions with regard to a woman's role in society" (29). This seems to create a stigma: a woman can only fully become empowered when she breaks free of constraints like marriage. The paradox then remains intact as there are still two conflicting portrayals of women: one embodied in Sita the devoted wife, enduring all that Rama inflicts upon her, but also Durga, whose strength and power is superior to that of men's. Both images are held up and deified. Both are ideal women. The important question to answer then is, are these two ideals mutually exclusive or can they coexist?

Concluding Reflections

Asking the question, "How would a Hindu woman define the feminine ideal?" might be the best approach in resolving the paradoxes and complexities surrounding their identity as it is socially constructed. The feminine ideal could be *stridharma* and the life of Sita as interpreted in the songs of the sisters of sorrow. Or the feminine ideal could be that which is portrayed in Gandhi's reinvented Sita, a political icon for feminine strength and independence outside domestic constraints. Or the ideal woman could be modeled after incarnations of Devi, like Durga and Kali, who are violent, powerful, fearsome, and tender, compassionate mothers. The reality is that all of these social constructions are simultaneously true within the context of the Hindu religious world. This is not an issue of which one is right, the sisters of sorrow or Gandhi or Kiran Bedi. They are all realities, merging, coexisting, synthesizing into one large dynamic ideological system, which creates the Hindu woman.

A key issue is, *how much of a say do Hindu women have in constructing their own identity?* This is where the real symptoms of oppression may lie. It is true, a woman's definition of herself cannot be separated from the social and cultural reality within which she is immersed. However, a common theme run-

ning throughout this examination of Hindu women and society is that until recently their identities have been defined in relation to men. A *stridharma* ideal is fulfilled by a woman's absolute devotion to her husband, requiring her to sacrifice herself to him and remain a silent sufferer. The *Devi Bhagavata* is another example of men defining women: they are evil because men cannot help themselves. Durga incarnations are those who exceed men in capacity. Women are responsible for the success or failure of their families. It is as the Tamil proverb says. Women create being, but they can also instigate downfall.

But these are not notions that women have attributed to themselves. These notions are the product of a tradition that gives voice to the patriarchy and these notions are made feasible only by man's self-proclaimed superiority as reinforced by these social constructions he creates. As Sallie McFague addresses in her book *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, the way a culture conceives "God" is reflective of that culture's social constructions, which themselves reflect power relations. Conceptions of God are indeed dynamic, that is, they are subject to change, fluctuation, and manipulation. The perfect example of manipulation of social constructs is seen through Gandhi's recreation of Sita. Gandhi changed a traditional interpretation of Sita, a perfect *stridharma* wife, into an independent woman stepping out into the political forum. The great part of Gandhi's movement is that it gave voice and agency to women. However, it proves how effective manipulation of social and cultural tenets to reach a certain outcome can be in defining women's identities. In response to the question of whether social reform is necessary, I would argue that it is, if only to the extent that women need to have more of a say in determining their own identities. Hindu women are responsible for deciding when they are oppressed and if they reach that conclusion they must realize that the oppression starts in allowing their identities to be formulated by patriarchal manipulation of social constructions. The Tamil proverb should be modified: women are responsible for defining their being, but they are also responsible for allowing their downfall.

Works Cited

Baig, Tara Ali. *India's Woman Power*. New Delhi: S. Chand & Co. Ltd., 1976.

Kinsley, David. *Hindu Goddesses: visions of the divine feminine in the Hindu religious tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Kishwar, Madhu. "Traditional Female Moral Exemplars in India." *Education About Asia*. Vol. 6, No. 3. Winter 2001: 23-31.

- Madan, T.N. "The Hindu Woman at Home." *Indian Women: from Purdah to Modernity*. Ed. B.R. Nanda. New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1990. 67-90.
- McFague, Sallie. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.
- McGee, Mary. "Desired Fruits: Motives and Intention in the Votive Rites of Hindu Women." *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Ed. Julia Leslie. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1991. 73-85.
- Sen, Nabaneeta Dev. "Sisters in Sorrow: Contemporary Indian Women's Re-telling of the Rama Tale." *From Independence Towards Freedom*. Eds. Bharati Ray and Aparna Basu. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 201-239.

Bibliography

- Dhruvarajan, Vanaja. *Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology*. Granby: Bergin and Garvey, 1989.
- Eck, Diana L. *Banaras: City of Light*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Embree, Ainslie T., ed. *Sources of Indian Tradition*. vol. 1. 2nd edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.
- Flood, Gavin. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Forbes, Geraldine. *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Hawley, John Stratton and Donna Marie Wulff, eds. *Devi: Goddesses of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf and Kathleen M. Erndl, eds. *Is the Goddess a Feminist?: the politics of South Asian goddesses*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.
- Leslie, Julia, ed. *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University of California Press, 1991.
- Patton, Laurie L. *Jewels of Authority: women and textual traditions in Hindu India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Ray, Bharati and Aparna Basu, eds. *From Independence Towards Freedom: Indian Women since 1947*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Who's that Lady?

Meghan Henning '04

<i>Aleph</i>	A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.
<i>Bet</i>	The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.
<i>Gimel</i>	She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.
<i>Dalet</i>	She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.
<i>He</i>	She is like the ships of the merchant, and brings her food from far away.
<i>Waw</i>	She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls.
<i>Zain</i>	She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
<i>Het</i>	She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.
<i>Tet</i>	She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. her lamp does not go out at night.
<i>Yod</i>	She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
<i>Kaph</i>	She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.
<i>Lamed</i>	She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson.
<i>Mem</i>	She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.

<i>Nun</i>	Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.
<i>Samek</i>	She makes fine linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.
<i>Ain</i>	Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.
<i>Pe</i>	She opens her mouth with wisdom; and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
<i>Zade</i>	She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.
<i>Qoph</i>	Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her;
<i>Resh</i>	"Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."
<i>Shin</i>	Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
<i>Taw</i>	Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.

Proverbs 31:10-31 (An Acrostic poem in Hebrew)

Women filed into the small room, at the Campus Crusade for Christ Spring retreat, anxious to learn more about how they as women could better serve God. Two of the younger women opened in prayer and directed everyone to Proverbs 31:10-31, the "Song of the Valiant Woman." As the discussion of this passage progressed the women were overwhelmed by all that the woman in the text had accomplished, holding her up as the standard to which a "Godly woman" should conform. This "valiant woman" seemed to be the Barbie of the Bible, an impossible dream that one could never fully attain. And yet, the leaders of the group were suggesting that each woman could, in fact, emulate this woman, if only they tried harder and "trusted God more" with the responsibilities of college life. Then, women wrote down a few ways in which they could improve themselves, using the text as a guide for becoming "God fearing women."

This illustration reveals the manner in which women of faith have looked to the woman of Proverbs 31 for guidance. As they do so they are often chagrined to find a veritable superwoman in both the private and public spheres.

Thus, the Proverbs 31 text becomes problematic for women of faith, seeming to suggest that they have to add more responsibilities, take on more roles, and “wear more hats,” just to bring honor to their husbands and families. Consequently, scholars who represent various schools of thought have sought to “reclaim” this text in a way that makes more sense for the contemporary woman, asking the question “Who’s that Lady?” Often these theological endeavors are conducted in ways that unwittingly impose foreign agendas on the text with questions that are totally removed from its original intentions. Granted, all scholars bring some agenda to the text, whether consciously or not, but those who are conscious of their perspective often do more justice to the text’s meaning. This paper will argue that, when not treated carefully, agendas foreign to the text’s world inhibit scholars from correctly identifying the Proverbs 31 woman because they force scholars to make false assumptions about the text. Fortunately other scholarship has tried to reclaim the text in less violent ways, aiming to identify first the Valiant Woman’s identity in her original context before thrusting her into Twenty First Century America. As these scholars take a closer glance, they find that a text, which was meant to encourage women in the ancient world, is being taken out of context and used to discourage women in contemporary society. Therefore this paper will ultimately make some conclusions about the original identity of the Proverbs 31 woman and then make some suggestions about who that woman might be today.

I. The violent voices of contemporary scholars: Who that Lady is *not*

First we must look to the scholars who have been paying the most attention to the Proverbs 31 woman and evaluate their interpretive methods. Liberation theologians (including feminist and womanist theology as well) are very concerned with the Biblical portrait of womanhood that this text paints, seeing a desperate need to “resignify,” or re-contextualize this text for a contemporary culture that is vastly different from the one in which the text is “embedded” (Bergant, 3-8). Unfortunately, many of the scholars that fall into this camp attempt to re-contextualize this text with very little concern for its original context at all. They also make no conscious notice of the fact that their interpretive methods are driven entirely by an agenda and questions that are foreign to the perspective from which the text was written and first read.

For example, Dianne Bergant admits that her “liberation-critical” reading of Wisdom literature “deliberately avoids questions of a historical nature and proceeds from a reader-centered approach” (Bergant, ix, 1-14). She believes that the

only way in which any theology can “reclaim” a Biblical text for a contemporary context is by accounting for issues of sustainability and enlisting the voices of the marginalized. Furthermore, Bergant makes very clear that she is writing from “feminist concerns,” starting with the assumption that Biblical texts were produced by men in a patriarchal culture. Consequently, her entire analysis of Proverbs 31 is conducted under the assumption that regardless of the historical context, the texts communicate to the reader that the domination of another is accepted and even admired (Bergant, vii-ix). This Liberation-Critical analysis of Proverbs 31 concludes that the Proverbs 31 woman might be ideal, but only according to the ideals of a patriarchal society in which a woman’s worth is judged in terms of her utility to man, and there seems to be a public versus private division of male and female labor (Bergant, 99). According to Bergant all of the Hebrew Bible is laden with these gender biases, and in the case of Proverbs only those Proverbs that supported the opinions of those in power were retained as an accurate expression of social norms (Bergant, 93-94).

Similarly, Jorge Maldonado has problems with the Proverbs 31 woman because she does not reflect the need for solidarity in the third world. On the surface it does not connect with poorer women who cannot live up to the roles that the valiant woman fills – i.e. a seeming economic independence (Maldonado, 36). Thus, like Bergant, Maldonado sees a need to reclaim this text by emphasizing the elements of the passage, which may indicate that this woman is in fact, “unusual, atypical and...revolutionary for her time” (Maldonado, 37; Bergant, 92-104). While both these theologians make interesting points about ways in which this woman is wielding power and doing things that were inconceivable for her time, they provide no evidence for this beyond the demands that their agendas place on the text. That is, they seek almost exclusively to read the text from a 21st Century lens. At one point Maldonado actually makes an argument for the two-income household from the place in the passage where the woman’s children bless her. Here Maldonado presumes that her children bless her because of her role as a revolutionary workingwoman, based upon the economic activities she carries out in the text, wrongfully presuming that these activities were “revolutionary” for an Ancient Israelite woman. Finally, Maldonado takes this conclusion a step farther, making this text the mouthpiece for a modern agenda (justifying a two-income household with pop-psychology from Oprah): “parents need to derive satisfaction from what they do in order to raise healthy, independent, and secure children” (Maldonado, 38-39).

Liberation theologians are not the only scholars who allow an agenda to interfere with the analysis of the Proverbs 31 passage. A literalist, Jill Briscoe, uses a method similar to that of Bergant and Maldonado, only from the perspective of conservative Christianity. Briscoe is a literalist, but in order to reclaim this text she proclaims that the Proverbs 31 woman is merely an ideal, who never lived at all. As support for this position she does not cite contextual evidence but simply states that "she (the Proverbs 31 woman) appears to be a very together person" (Briscoe, 9-15). Briscoe's work begins here, suggesting that contemporary women tackle this overwhelming and unattainable ideal by "beginning with the self," using Proverbs 31 as a self-help guide. Briscoe's self-help approach reclaims the edgy and unattainable goals that this text has upheld and demythologizes them with conservative doctrines of redemption (Briscoe, 28-41).

Briscoe also "reclaims" the text via individualistic thought stating that the valiant woman of Proverbs 31 "wouldn't have an equal because *every woman is unique*...some of us have some of her talents and some of us have other gifts that are not mentioned here" (Briscoe, 30). This misstep in interpretation further ignores the context of the passage, totally denying that the activities of the Proverbs 31 woman might have had a different significance in her world than whatever significance they hold in our contemporary world, missing a crucial piece of her identity. Likewise, individualism and autonomy are the guiding contemporary assumptions, which Nancy Rockwell brings to the Proverbs 31 text, using these verses to legitimate the pro-choice argument in the abortion debate (Rockwell, 24-27). Her conclusions may or may not represent what a God-fearing woman might do in these circumstances, but this cannot be discerned from her arguments because she fails to treat the text with responsibility. In her conclusions she uses passionate language to make her point, rather than calling upon the historical identity of the Proverbs 31 woman or the context of these verses in the larger Biblical tradition (Rockwell, 27). In the final analysis, for both Briscoe and Rockwell, the Proverbs 31 woman can be translated to today's society with absolutely no regard for differences between the ancient culture and today's world, leaving both authors free to make the text say what best suits their respective contemporary audiences.

On the contrary, not all writers who see the Proverbs 31 woman as an asset to their cause do such violence to the text. For example, Madipoane Masenya writes from a womanist perspective while paying close attention to the context of this passage. Masenya is honest about the fact that some of the questions we ask are foreign to the frame of reference supplied by the text. As she comes to

Proverbs 31, she too notices that this woman's identity is wrapped up in her husband and cannot be understood independently (Masenya, "Bosadi," 152-155). Rather than throwing out these pieces of the story and focusing on whatever speaks readily to the contemporary South African problems, Masenya takes the time to identify who the valiant woman was in her original context so that she can compare that context with South Africa and interpret accordingly. Thus, Masenya concludes (with the help of Camp's essay on household economy in Ancient Israel) that the Proverbs 31 woman of worth "is a family woman who has the concerns of her household at heart" (Masenya, "Bosadi," 152). This means that today the needs of the household should be at the heart of both African men and women, because men and women's roles are no longer so sharply divided. This places responsibility for economic subsistence on "God fearing" men and women (Masenya, "Bosadi," 152-154).

II. Biblical Background of Proverbs 31:10-31: Who was that Lady?

Masenya identifies the Proverbs 31 woman as an androgynous symbol for economic responsibility. Still one is left wondering, who is that lady? One also wonders if she is a contemporary workingwoman, legitimating the two-income household as Bergant and Maldonado suggested. Or is she the model of a unique individual, illustrating self-assurance for women in a contemporary world, as Briscoe and Rockwell suggest? Or perhaps she is an exemplar of one who cares for the subsistence needs of the family. The answers to these questions are not as easily uncovered as some of these scholars contend. As Masenya's work suggests, one can find a richer, truer picture of the Proverbs 31 woman simply by researching her context within the Biblical narrative. Patricia Gundry also points to a deeper interpretive method, calling readers to view this text as a call to personal wholeness that can only be found when one searches for the "complete woman," of Proverbs 31 (Gundry, 15). Thus, any reading of Proverbs 31 must examine all that this woman was to determine all that she would be today.

First, attention must be given to the text's position within Proverbs itself. The book of Proverbs is part of the wisdom tradition. Wisdom literature encompasses a variety of genres, but the common theme is a connection between godly prudence and every day life. Proverbs contains two of the four types¹ of wisdom literature as identified by R. E. Murphy; "practical wisdom" and "theologizing wisdom" ("Assumptions and Problems," 104). Practical wisdom outlines what is meant by "fear of the Lord," providing applications for religious

conduct and guidelines for everyday transactions (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems, 104). The other type of wisdom that is found in Proverbs is the theologizing of wisdom, simply representing the notion that all wisdom originates with God. The theologizing of wisdom provides a link to the creation narrative in that humans can understand the world only because the Divine creator imparts Divine wisdom, as found in Proverbs (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems," 104, Perdue, 37, 47). An example of theologizing wisdom is the Woman Wisdom who opens the book of Proverbs and is described in more detail in chapter 8, a personification of Divine Wisdom that gives life to this character who under rides the very creation of the earth and pursues men and women, convincing them to take the prudential "path less traveled."

While Murphy makes a distinction between these two types of wisdom, they are inextricably linked in Proverbs, which stands in sharp contrast to the contemporary dichotomy between the sacred and secular (Whybray, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 4). That is, the book of Proverbs describes the ways of the world and then provides practical instructions for living within this world order. The Proverbs themselves have a narrative character, particularly when describing the consequences of a given action. A prudent manner of behaving is described and then followed by a description of a predictable reward or result of that type of behavior (Bergant, 79, 93-94). According to R. N. Whybray, this trend is reflective of the Old Testament world-view in which it is not counter-intuitive (unlike our contemporary world-view) for otherworldly "moral" practices to lead to practical, this worldly rewards, because all of these things fall into the same category of things which are "intrinsically good and desirable" (*New Century Bible Commentary*, 4).

Thus, any view of the Proverbs 31 woman must take into account this unitary view of life, taking care not to presume that her activities and her "fear of the Lord" are one in the same in her world. Furthermore, this world-view might suggest that her work within the household and in the city are not expressions of a patriarchal double standard in which women must "earn their keep," as suggested by some liberation theologians. Rather her work represents a responsibility to "behave rightly" in God's kingdom and in the world simultaneously via practical activities. Unfortunately this sense of unity is lost and even mistaken for oppression when looking at the text through a modern lens in which the dichotomies of sacred vs. secular are assumed.

Next, the structure of this particular Proverb must be examined. Proverbs 31:10-31 is in acrostic with each verse beginning with a consecutive letter of the

Hebrew alphabet. Scholars disagree over the effects that this form might have on the meaning of the passage. On the one hand, some think that this formal structure prevents the description of the ideal woman from being complete, and in effect removes any possibility for progression of thought, thematic sequence, or true narrative style (Bergant, 92; Whybray, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 426). In fact some scholars even regard all Biblical acrostics as "detractions from the true outpouring of emotion" (Minkoff, 31). On the other hand, other scholars think that this acrostic form adds to the meaning conveyed by the author, emphasizing that it indicates the author's control and provides direction for a more intentional display of emotion (Minkoff, 31). This latter position is represented with greater strength in the literature. In the case of Proverbs 31:10-31, the acrostic structure reflects the completeness of this woman, showing that she covers her responsibilities from *aleph* to *taw* (the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet) (Bergant, 78, Gundry, 15, Minkoff, 31).

Furthermore, this acrostic structure points to Proverbs 31:10-31 as more than a collection of practical tidbits of advice (McCreesh, 25). The editor of Proverbs seems to have closed with Proverbs 31:10-31 as a book-end poem which mirrors the image of the "Woman Wisdom" in chapters 1-9 of Proverbs in "both form and content" (Bergant, 78). Most scholars agree that these concluding verses are probably a separate conclusion to the entire book of Proverbs, suggesting that all of the information within the book of Proverbs is based on the ideal that "the Fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 31:30; Bergant, 78; Brown, 49; McCreesh, 25; Minkoff, 31-46; Murphy, "Form Criticism," 482; Perdue, 277; Whybray, 426). Throughout Proverbs there is a contrast between Woman Folly, "whose ways lead to death," and Woman Wisdom, "who promises life" (Crenshaw, 355-56, McCreesh, 40, Perdue, 50). Proverbs 31:10-31 concludes this theme in favor of Woman Wisdom, and "draws together major themes, motifs, and ideas of the book in a final, summarizing statement about wisdom under the image of an industrious, resourceful, and selfless wife" (McCreesh, 25, 40).

The actual parallels between Woman Wisdom (Proverbs 1-9) and the Proverbs 31 woman, beyond the central one already mentioned ("Fear of the Lord") are astounding. Both Woman Wisdom and the Proverbs 31 woman are "more precious than jewels" (Proverbs 3:15, 31:10). Whoever finds them will not lack material gain (3:13-14; 31:11). Also, Woman Wisdom is found at the city gates (the busiest center of the city where people enter and exit) calling out, and the Proverbs 31 woman is praised at the city gates. Finally, the theme that

Woman Wisdom builds her own house "of peace, industry and successful living," is recapitulated in Proverbs 31 where the woman of valor's well-managed household brings rewards to herself and others (comp. Proverbs 9:1; 14:1; Crenshaw, 355-56; Whybray, 426). At the very least all of these parallels indicate that the Proverbs 31 woman is a great example of what is considered "wise" throughout Proverbs (Whybray, "The Intellectual Tradition," 17). Yet the style, positioning and thematic nuances of Proverbs 31:10-31 which have all been cited above, seem to indicate something stronger. The view of the Proverbs 31 woman as an intentional conclusion to the book of Proverbs suggests that she is indeed, the portrait of not only a Godly woman, but also of a Godly person-man or woman. This conclusion rests on the fact that she reflects all of the characteristics of Woman Wisdom, the female personification of God's divine Wisdom, intended as an inspiration to both men and women for right thought and action. Thus, Masenya's interpretation of the text in a way that places economic responsibility on both men and women is an accurate reflection of the literary characteristics of this text. (The significance this connection might have in terms of interpreting Proverbs 31:10-31 as a metaphorical figure rather than an actuality will be discussed in greater detail later.) In fact, as one seeks to read this passage within the context of Proverbs and the larger Wisdom tradition, Masenya's conclusions move to the forefront, echoed by other scholars' identification of this woman as a metaphorical representation of Woman Wisdom. These ideas are important to consider in greater depth, because they would suggest that the Proverbs 31 woman makes demands on all people, not just women, as commonly presumed by most theologians (Bergant, Briscoe, Gundry, Maldonado, Rockwell).

However, this focus on the literary character of Proverbs 31:10-31, should not be confused with form criticism. Form criticism, or identifying the form of the Proverb in order to try and discern information about the context is an arbitrary task to some degree (Murphy, "Form Criticism," 481-483; Whybray, 14-15). There are very few clues as to how these sayings were used or who used them. In fact, many passages could have been didactic in more than one situation. For instance the Proverbs that begin with "my son" could be used on a variety of occasions beyond the biological parent-child relationship, carrying a great "density of meaning" (Murphy, "Form Criticism," 481-483, "Interpretation," 295-297). Consequently, the focus of the interpretation of Wisdom literature should not be upon the form itself, but rather on how the saying was understood and applied in reality. After all, as Murphy argues, the Wisdom tradition itself is con-

cerned with the "right action at the right time in the right manner" ("Assumptions and Problems," 109). Al Wolters provides a great example for Murphy's argument, engaging in form critical analysis of Proverbs 31 almost exclusively, making very precise, but minute conclusions. In fact, Wolters represents the opposite extreme of the theologians first considered here who paid no attention to the nuances of the text or its context. Wolters' work is fascinating and pays great attention to detail, and yet seems to be a lost cause if the Wisdom tradition is as diverse and nebulous as most scholars admit. For instance, Wolters spends an entire article identifying the form of Proverbs 31 as a heroic hymn, of the same form of hymns in praise of Yahweh elsewhere in Scripture ("Heroic Hymn," 446-457; "The Song of the Valiant Woman," 30-41). While this analysis does lead to some compelling conclusions about the woman of worth as a practical hero created to contrast erotic images of women in eastern culture, it ultimately fails to do justice to the text, ignoring its problematic nature as a part of the Wisdom tradition. This oversimplification also falls short of an answer to our driving question, "Who's that Lady?" inadequately dealing with the complexities of the text as it is situated in the entire, diverse, Wisdom tradition (Crenshaw, 353-354).

In light of the inadequacies of form criticism, one must turn to the Wisdom tradition at large in order to truly contextualize the Proverbs 31 woman. As one looks to the wisdom literature for clues, the parallel between Proverbs 1-9 and Proverbs 31 again becomes significant. John J. Collins and G. E. W. Nickelsburg identify two kinds of ideal figures in Ancient Judaism, raising the question of whether this woman functioned as a paradigmatic figure or an eschatological one (7-8). If she was paradigmatic she was perceived as a model intended for direct imitation. On the other hand, if the woman of valor was an eschatological figure she may have simply "given expression to the ideas which influenced behavior" (Collins and Nickelsburg, 8). T. P. McCreesh and William Brown both argue that this ideal figure is wholly eschatological in nature, simply a symbol of Woman Wisdom, based upon the variety and number of tasks she engages in, word repetition and allusions to wisdom or to a "wisdom activity" (Brown, 49, McCreesh, 44). Yet Collins and Nickelsburg warn against using the categories they created in order to dichotomize the text, arguing that one cannot systematically identify one type of ideal figure or another in Scripture, but she must pay careful attention to the context of each text/figure and the "unique characteristics of the individual phenomena" (11). In this instance such attention to context requires one to examine the extent to which wisdom, and then in particular this passage, was connected to the royal tradition. If there is a strong rela-

tionship there, then the Proverbs 31 woman was likely to have been a paradigmatic figure, setting up an ideal which was to be imitated with precision.

As many liberation theologians have assumed, the wisdom tradition originated in the royal tradition, reflecting the "ethos of the official classes," because the sages were associated directly with kings and leaders (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems," 103-104). Identifying the social background of Wisdom literature, Robert Gordis concludes that all Wisdom represents the pragmatism and conservatism of the upper-classes, serving and maintaining the interests of the status quo (79-82). However notions such as these have created a perceived dichotomy between Wisdom literature and the rest of Hebrew Scripture, presuming that Wisdom literature represented the demands of the status quo versus the prophetic voice present in the rest of Scripture (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems," 105). Again Murphy argues that this form of literary criticism isn't conclusive, that sharp lines cannot be drawn between prophecy and Wisdom. Rather, the two are inextricably related, because the Old Testament writers wrote out of the same culture in which both kinds of ideas were central.

Furthermore, Wisdom must still be considered Yahwistic, because it "was formed within a people in covenant with Yahweh" (Murphy, "Interpretation" 298). More specifically, the last section of Proverbs is not even likely to be from a courtly perspective due to the date of its addition with respect to the date of the exile and fall of such structures (Whybray, *New Century Bible Commentary* 9). Therefore, the Proverbs 31 woman is not just a symbolic hero as Wolters and McCreech might like to conclude, but she belongs within the entire Old Testament tradition, informing and also being shaped by other pieces of the culture that "believed in the LORD as Savior and Creator" (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems" 108). Again, this requires the interpreter of Proverbs 31:10-31 to break down the false dichotomies and categories which have typically framed this debate. As Ralph Marcus suggests, personified Woman Wisdom has "an obscure position between personal being and principle. She is both, she is neither, the one nor the other" (161). This same view holds true then for the Proverbs 31 woman, who must be situated somewhere between paradigm and eschatological ideal, as she probably functioned in both capacities originally.

Finally, an alternative view of this text and its original context further elucidates that this woman was both a practical model and an eschatological ideal. Ellen Louise Lyons, like others notices that the Proverbs 31 woman looks like a pre-monarchial woman (237). In particular she carries out all of the same functions and roles as a woman from the pre-monarchial period would have done

according to Camp's functionalist perspective, and Meyers' work (Camp in Masenya, "South African Context" 60; Meyers in Masenya, "Bosadi" 150-151). In pre-monarchical society women carried out all of the work that required technical skill and they produced all of the "finished products." Women's work was also much more varied than men's and men in turn were working in the agricultural realm, trying to make unfertile soil produce (Meyers, 1-47). In this context women were key to the household's effectiveness and economic sustainability (Lyons, 238-239). Pre-monarchical women also still benefited from the financial security of a dowry, able to "laugh at the days to come" (Proverbs, 31:25; Gundry, 169). Situating Proverbs 31:10-31 in this context means that the Proverbs 31 woman was initially a pre-monarchical woman, accounting for what seems today to be outlandish industriousness. In addition to fitting the pre-monarchical paradigm of a "Godly woman," this text also makes sense in the era of reconstruction during the exile. Repopulating and rebuilding called for women's work. Thus, as Lyons suggested, the text itself was reclaimed in the post-exilic period because women as "productive, respected, members of society must have again become a valid cultural model" (Lyons, 242). This reclaiming of a pre-monarchical text for a post-exilic audience not only foreshadows a modern need to reclaim the text in this way, but also reveals the manner in which the Proverbs 31 woman acted as both paradigm and eschatological ideal. That is, she was and is today both a realistic representative of what a Godly woman looked like in ancient Israel and is simultaneously a wholly otherworldly ideal to which no woman could ever attain. As Brown suggests, the Proverbs 31 woman represents the embodiment of Wisdom, not in a set of guidelines, but in a picture of a pragmatic woman of high character, intended to preserve her community (49).

To summarize, the Proverbs 31 woman cannot be identified until one considers her rich history within both Proverbs and the Wisdom tradition. In this context her complex identity is unveiled, revealing that both her position in the text (as the conclusion of Proverbs) and her characteristics suggest a strong relationship to Woman Wisdom of Proverbs 1-9. Furthermore, the fact that the Proverbs 31 woman is not likely to represent the royal tradition of wisdom writing but rather a post-exilic memory of the ancient, pre-monarchical way of life, suggests that this text functioned as an eschatological ideal based on the paradigm of the Ancient Israelite woman. This ideal embodies the "ideas which influenced behavior," encouraging readers to pursue Godly wisdom in their own context, no matter what the practical means might be (Collins and

Nickelsburg, 8). That is, just as Woman Wisdom is seen carrying out the tasks needed to run the Ancient Israelite household (then central to the Hebrew community of faith) or to restore the kingdom after the exile, so also Woman Wisdom today would be found carrying out the practical tasks needed to restore the contemporary community of faith.

III. So who *is* that Lady?

The Proverbs 31 woman is Woman Wisdom, the complete embodiment of Godliness in Ancient Israel, carrying out all of the practical responsibilities of the day. Since this eschatological ideal was originally based on the pragmatic concerns of post-exilic Israel, it should not be used to overwhelm or discourage people of faith today, but rather to spur individuals on to discovery of Divine Wisdom through practical activity. That is, this woman was not intended to be some unattainable standard or strict set of rules for conduct, but rather a representation of God's character that spurs the community on to restore God's kingdom on earth. The Proverbs 31 Woman is not an eschatological representation of a human woman, but of Godself. This eschatological ideal, then is not just for women, but for all people, men and women, painting a picture of part of God's character in which the tasks of daily life are completed, bringing honor and praise.

Precisely who is that Lady then, today? This consideration of her as Woman Wisdom does not remove any contemporary implications for daily life that she may have represented. In fact, it simply serves to remove the violence done to both the text and women when one interprets the Proverbs 31 Woman as a paradigm to be directly imitated today. Her function within the text was based loosely on a paradigm of the Ancient Israelite woman, but reclaimed in the post-exilic world as the personification of Woman Wisdom, used to challenge Israelites to restoration of Godly culture. Thus, she still challenges men and women today, not to the specific tasks of the Ancient Israelite household, or the male-female separation of roles (private vs. public), but to the spiritual connection between human and divine activity fueled by divine Wisdom. The Proverbs 31 Woman speaks boldly to the community of faith today, calling people of faith to join God in God's practical activities in the world.

While this interpretation may seem too broad or vague, it does have particular implications in different contexts. "God's practical activities" can be identified by calling upon God's activity as revealed thematically throughout Scripture (a task too large for this study to consider exhaustively). Here for brevity sake we will simply consider two aspects of God's activity: the restoration of

the community of faith and concern for the outsider. I have chosen these two aspects because they seem to connect most directly to the illustration that introduced a need to reclaim the Proverbs 31 woman at the outset of this work (i.e., a Denison women's retreat).

In the instance of the Campus Crusade for Christ movement, the Proverbs 31 woman is calling women and men of faith to join God in bringing healing and unity to a diverse group of believers on Denison's campus. The broken office of religious life, the exclusion of some religious groups, and the promise of a new program might be seen as a correlative to the broken temple in the post-exilic period. Thus, men and women of faith at Denison should look to the Proverbs 31 woman as a reminder that God is dynamically present in all aspects of the restoration process and participation in this process is actually joining God in God's activity. Second, the Proverbs 31 woman could be calling believers to take responsibility for the outsider, as illustrated throughout Scripture, joining God in this process of drawing the other in. On Denison's campus an example of this could be seen in the recent CommUNITY festival, a response to the hate expressed towards homosexuals by a group of religious fanatics. As women and men participated in this event they embraced diversity, and communicated love for those considered outcasts in society alongside God, joining Woman Wisdom in Her work.

So in conclusion, the answer to the question "Who's that Lady?" is found in context to be Woman Wisdom and can be recontextualized today to encourage the community of faith, as she once did, to join Her in God's practical activities in the world.

Notes

1. Murphy's discussion of "types" of wisdom is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to illustrate that the category of "wisdom literature" is very broad, encompassing a wide variety of texts. Furthermore, more than one type of wisdom can be embodied in one text. The first two types of wisdom, not represented in the text at hand, are "judicial wisdom" and "nature wisdom." Judicial wisdom is evidenced in 1Kings 3 where Solomon gives out the correct decision in the case of the harlots, preserving order with the wisdom received from the Lord. Nature wisdom is seen in the secrets of nature, unveiled through sayings ("Assumptions and Problems," 40).

Works Cited:

Bergant, Dianne. *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

- Briscoe, Jill. *Queen of hearts: the role of today's woman based on Proverbs 31*. Old Tappan, NJ: F.H. Revell, 1984.
- Brown, William P. *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Camp, Claudia. "Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration." *Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.* Hoglund, Kenneth G., et. al. eds. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 45-76.
- Collins, John J. and G.E.W. Nickelsburg. *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism*. Missoula: Scholars, 1980.
- Crenshaw, J.L. "In Search of Divine Presence: Some Remarks Preliminary to a Theology of Wisdom." *Review and Expositor*. 74 (1977): 353-69.
- Gordis, R. "The Social Background of the Wisdom Literature." *Hebrew Union College Annual*. 18(1943, 44): 77-118.
- Gundry, Patricia. *The Complete Woman*. New York: Doubleday, 1981.
- Lyons, Ellen Louise. "Note on Proverbs 31:10-31." *The Listening Heart*: 237-246.
- Maldonado, Jorge. "A fulfilled family: the family of a virtuous woman: Proverbs 31:11-31." *Even in the Best of Families: The Family of Jesus and Other Biblical Families Like Ours*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994.
- Marcus, Ralph. "On Biblical Hypostases of Wisdom." *Hebrew Union College Annual*. 23(1950-51): 157-171.
- Masenyana, Madipoane. "A Bosadi (Womanhood) Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31." *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Dube, Musa W. ed. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature; Geneva : WCC Publications, 2001, 145.
- _____. "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Reading for the Liberation of African (Northern Sotho) Women." *Semeia*. 78 (1997): 55-68.
- McCreesh, Thomas Paul. *Biblical Sound and Sense: Poetic Sound Patterns in Proverbs 10-29*. Sheffield, UK: J.S.O.T. Press, c. 1991.
- Meyers, Carol. "The Family in Early Israel." *Families in Ancient Israel*. Leo G. Perdue ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997: 1-48.
- Minkoff, Harvey. "As Simple as ABC: What Acrostics in the Bible Can Demonstrate." *Bible Review*. 13(2, 1997) 27-31, 46-47.

- Murphy, R.E. "Assumptions and Problems in Old Testament Wisdom Research." *Catholic Bible Quarterly*. 29 (1967): 101-112.
- _____. "Form Criticism and Wisdom Literature." *Catholic Bible Quarterly*. 31(1969): 475-483.
- _____. "The Interpretation of Old Testament Wisdom Literature." *Interpretation*. 23(1969): 289-301.
- Perdue, Leo G. *Proverbs in: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000.
- Rockwell, Nancy. "Scripture and Morality: How Good Women Make Wise Choices." *The Other Side*. 26 (March-April 1990): 24-27.
- Whybray, R.N. *New Century Bible Commentary: Proverbs*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.
- _____. *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament*. New York: De Gruyter, 1974.
- Wolters, Al. "Proverbs 31:10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form Critical Analysis." *Vetus Testamentum*. 38 (1988): 446-457.
- _____. "The Song of the Valiant Woman:" *Studies in the Interpretation of Proverbs 31:10-31*" Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001.