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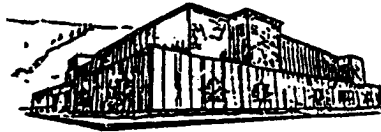
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MAITREYI DEVI AND MIRCEA  
ELIADE: ONE MOMENT AS  
FRACTAL

by

Geoffrey James Aguirre

B.A. University of Montana, United States, 1999

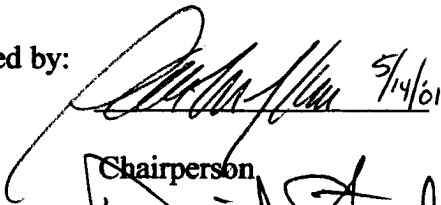
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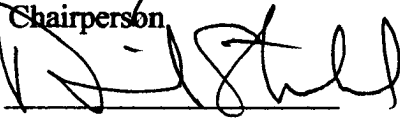
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English Literature

Maitreyi Devi and Mircea Eliade: One Moment as Fractal

Director: Professor Kathleen Kane KMK

Since the publishing of Maitreyi Devi's *It Does Not Die*, originally *Na Hanyate*, critics have been discussing her book in relation to Mircea Eliade's *Bengal Nights*, originally *La Nuit Bengali*. The texts are both partially autobiographical, which complicates their genre, and speak to a relatively short amount of time during which Eliade was a guest in the Dasgupta household. Many critics have reduced conversation about the texts into a contest in which only one version can be seen as true. Other critics believe the truth is located somewhere between the texts. Alternatively, this thesis chooses not to focus on the element of truth. Instead, utilizing primarily theorist Homi Bhabha, this thesis offers an analysis of the texts on their own respective levels. When seen as a conversation rather than a contest, insight into the binary relationship between colonizer and colonized, woman and man, and East and West can be gained.

## **Recognition and Deconstruction of Binaries in Postcolonial Thought and Theory**

Any understanding of historical events is inextricably joined to the larger system of understanding that pervades any society's particular reality. Ancient Greeks believed earthquakes and tidal waves were the result of Poseidon's wrath. Late Victorians saw class struggle as the survival of the fittest. Shakespeare lived in a time when fairies roamed the land, not because fairies existed then and not now, for fairies have never existed for us, but because the people of his time believed they did. The language and narrative of a particular culture are intertwined with its assumptions about existence in general. History and fact are not separate from this phenomenon because the words themselves reflect their entanglement. A story or a fact cannot stand outside of a system of understanding because it is a part of that system, much like a fractal whose infinitely complex structure cannot be explained in any systematic or generalized way.

Maitreyi Devi's *It Does Not Die* and Mircea Eliade's *Bengal Nights* are two attempts to recount the history of a romance set in the colonial past of India. They both tell the story of an actual and then fictional, cross-cultural romance that unfolded in a pre-independence period of modern subcontinental history. However, these textually interrelated documents describe this same relational moment in time from two points of view in conflict with one another. In the texts themselves, facts are disputed, most notably whether or not the romance involved sexual union. In the larger context of intercultural exchange, western consciousness and its focus on ego (superiority), individuality, veracity and science, collide with Indian consciousness<sup>1</sup> and its focus on unity, scholarship, philosophy and truth. In this conflict over historically remote literary

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<sup>1</sup> Indian consciousness and western consciousness are not mutually exclusive. Their foci converge at times.

and historical facts, the texts share a disturbing similarity: they are constructed and perhaps even over-determined by a binary logic. In reading material relating to the texts of Devi and Eliade, we can see how some postcolonial theorists and critics slip back into a non-productive reading strategy over-predicated on binary logic. Much knowledge can be gained about Devi's and Eliade's texts through an explorative approach devoid of the antagonism that usually reduces the texts to contestants in a game for validity. Instead, there is no contest (neither winner nor loser), as both authors' viewpoints are valid, just as every person can decide upon the worth of the presented information herself or himself.

Eliade<sup>2</sup> began writing *Maitreyi (Bengal Nights)* toward the conclusion of 1932 specifically to enter into a literary contest. In his fictive first-person account, a young Frenchman named Alain accepts an invitation to live with the Sens, a Brahman family. Shortly after his arrival, Alain enters into an affair with the Sens' daughter Maitreyi; it is a relationship that leads to their marriage, his eventual expulsion from the household and his disillusioned wandering thereafter. Eliade's book sold well and Devi became aware of it six or seven years after its publication, but did not understand the explicit sexual nature of the relationship recorded therein until a meeting between herself and a close friend of Eliade's in 1972. She had Eliade's book translated from the French shortly thereafter. Upon reading for herself the depiction of events Eliade had composed, she began writing *It Does Not Die*. In her work, Devi tells her own version of the affair,

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<sup>2</sup> One should keep in mind Philippe Lejeune's criticism when one speaks about an author, "An author is not a person. He is a person who writes and publishes. Straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, he is the connection between the two. The author is defined as simultaneously a socially responsible real person and the producer of a discourse. For the reader, who does not know the real person, all the while believing in his existence, the author is defined as the person capable of producing this discourse, and so he imagines what he is like from what he produces." Of course, there are no ways of talking about an author that will escape this, or a similar, critique.



which was, as she saw it, devoid of sexual intercourse, but not of sexual contact. Devi probably attempts to refute the notion of sexual intercourse introduced by Eliade's text because of the negative professional and social repercussions such an accusation could have. Typically and problematically labeled a "response<sup>3</sup>," her account deviates from Eliade's storytelling frame, as she includes appropriate background and updated information. It seems that it is also meant to be taken for the most part as accurate, rather than being willfully "semiautobiographical<sup>4</sup>."

In attempting to pursue each text in a nonreductive way, it is prudent to look to the example of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha. He argues in *The Location of Culture* that:

the point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse. To judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its *effectivity*; with the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs colonial identification subject (both colonizer and colonized). (Bhabha 67)

Bhabha argues that a critical process that works to label images (in this case novels) with a positive or negative tag fails to escape the larger system of stereotypical discourse. In order to escape the system, the reader/critic must set aside positive and negative labels and rely on a more complex system of analysis. Bhabha suggests that the best approach to texts structured around binary oppositions is to analyze the structure of the system in order to generate subsequently a thesis concerning the complication or deconstruction of

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<sup>3</sup> The label of "response" will be discussed in greater detail later when it is more appropriate to the discussion.

<sup>4</sup> An anonymous critic says of *It Does Not Die*, "Devi (1914-1990), though best known as a poet, ironically takes fewer artistic liberties than Eliade ... in her plainly autobiographical account of their relationship" (Rev. of *It Does Not Die: A Romance* 56). On the other hand, Isabel Colegate writes, "Both are autobiographical" (12), thereby ignoring any complication of the term autobiographical.

that binary. Similarly, the purpose of this thesis is to analyze the binary structures of the texts, not to label moments in these books positive or negative, but rather to intervene in the interpretive conversation in order to point out the dangers<sup>5</sup> of reasserting binary opposition in the reading of postcolonial texts. An analysis of binaries serves to complicate the dynamics operating in and between *It Does Not Die* and *Bengal Nights*; therefore Bhabha's method can be implemented in accord with the goal of this thesis. Without the complication non-binary methods of thought offer, postcolonial theorists and critics fail to break away from the reductive thought processes of the colonial modes of thinking they allegedly contest.

Bhabha advocates focusing on where binaries break down in order to demonstrate their inherent instability. He says, "What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (Bhabha 1). A rare opportunity<sup>6</sup> is present when considering *It Does Not Die* and *Bengal Nights* since one can identify binaries working in, as well as between, the texts, and in analyzing them, some insight into the deeper workings of the system of power that binary logic supports may be gained. Of major concern to the postcolonial critic is the textual presource of the binary of colonizer/colonized; however, of great importance too are the dichotomies of true/false, objective/subjective, civilized/primitive, virgin/whore, superiority/inferiority, real/fantasy, love/hate and present/past. By concentrating both on moments articulating cultural differences and on textual

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<sup>5</sup> Modes of thought postcolonial theory contests and critiques are dependent on binary thinking to achieve their goals of subjugation. It would be illogical then for advocates of postcolonial theory to invoke the same logic in a contestable mode.

documentation of hybridity, the processes of subjectification made possible through stereotypical discourse can be elucidated.

For the most part, western consciousness has been historically incapable of thinking in terms of non-oppositions, process or neutrality, that is, in complex and nonjudgmental terms, and so is trapped in a system of reductive binaries. In an interview with Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, currently the preeminent scholar in the area of binary logic, says:

Therefore, one has to admit, before any dissociation of language and speech, code and message, etc. (and everything that goes along with such a dissociation), a systematic production of differences, the *production* of a system of differences—a *différance*—within whose effects one eventually, by abstraction and according to determined motivations, will be able to demarcate a linguistics of linguistics of speech, etc. (28)

Language demands that an idea be defined against another idea. An idea is defined by what it is not, its antithesis, rather than what it is. According to Nietzsche's diagnosis, thought processes operate based on binaries too, which comes about because "Extreme positions are not succeeded by moderate ones but by extreme positions of the opposite kind" (Nietzsche 35). Bhabha goes on to ask, "Must we always polarize in order to polemicize?" and proposes moving beyond this type of discourse when he says, "the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One ... nor the Other ... but something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both" (Bhabha 19, 28). Refusing to analyze in terms of binary oppositions means complicating both binaries until it is clear that they are not opposed to each other on all levels and so are not antithetical or mutually exclusive. Because there

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<sup>6</sup> Such perspicuous accounts of intercultural exchange by literary personages must be considered at best a rarity.

are so many binaries<sup>7</sup> at play in both books, it becomes useful to discuss where they appear and, if at all, where they are overcome.

### **Defusing the Conflict: Truth and Objectivity Interrogated**

When considering western modes of consciousness the first binary to take into consideration is the true/false binary, which is multifaceted. The truth-value of a story contributes to most readers' ultimate understanding and opinion of that story. For instance, Ginu Kamani says of *Bengal Nights*:

Eliade had perhaps come to India to transcend the Judeo-Christian sexual repression in himself, which experience he could only attempt to describe in fiction, rendering his object Maitreyi into a caricature of a tantric goddess, transforming her inexplicably from virgin to sex queen in his own unrealistic, self-indulgent fantasy.

Her attack on Eliade implies her disbelief in the account put forward in his text and she is not the only critic to suggest disbelief in Eliade's novel. For instance, K.E. Fleming writes, "The real-life Maitreyi, even at 16 an earnest scholar, becomes in Eliade's hands a giggling schoolgirl" (392). The critics imply in their statements that truth is a major determining factor in the credibility of an author's work. Veracity's status as a virtue might perhaps stem from scientific, Judeo-Christian, philosophical, or other roots, but its origins are not so much a concern in this discussion. As is the case with lawyers,

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<sup>7</sup> Elucidation of the term "binary" is needed. The word "binary" simply means, "consisting of, indicating, or involving two." The binaries at play in and between the texts do indicate a twofold system of categories, but the categories are not equally stigmatized. Because this is this case, "polarity" might be a better word, as it calls to mind a system indicating positive and negative. Binary systems are not typically neutral, rather one side is attributed a positive value and the other side is attributed a negative value. In this reductive system, the positive side is only positive at the expense of the negative side being negative. In this way, a simplistic system of values is constructed or as the nineteenth-century anti-binary thinker Nietzsche says, "Opposites suit a plebian age because [they are] easier to comprehend" (24). This simple, reductive system is an enemy to non-oppositions, process or neutrality, as it allows for no in-between space. Binaries are not synonymous with polarities, but a binary is usually a polarity and a polarity is always a binary. It might be added that an ordering mechanism becomes inevitably necessary during an analysis, and organizational procedures always involve some reduction. However, binary or polar systems

historians, scientists and many others, one might spend much time weighing various facts, records and statements from the two texts against each other in order to discover what really happened, but whatever the verdict, it was reached through the use and interpretation of textual sources. It is impossible for the verdict to be objective because it is posited on textual grounds that must be interpreted. Even if video and audio recordings of an event are available, which is not the case for Devi and Eliade's texts, interpretation remains a subjective activity. The past exists, but for denizens of our current postmodern age<sup>8</sup>, the question is, as Linda Hutcheon tells us "whether we can ever *know* that past other than through its textualized remains" (261). An analysis of the texts is more fruitful than falling into the trap of true/false binarism.

To posit any theses concerning the nature of the historical Devi-Eliade relationship based on these two texts is impossible if one is seeking what really happened. Immediate objections may be raised concerning an analysis of Devi and Eliade's texts on their own respective levels. The questions, "How are we to take an author at her or his word if they are at odds with another author's testimony? Should we not instead be seeking for the truth?" may be asked, but whatever the truth is said to be will simply become a consensus, which does not necessarily reflect the truth. Sally Eckhoff comments on the reverse side of Eliade's text, "Eliade's book is wrenching. Devi's is musical. The truth flows tantalizing between." Eckhoff's interpretive strategy is another example of a search for the truth. She assumes that the books have an equal

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take this reduction to an extreme level. The word polarity cannot replace binary unproblematically as it is most often the word "binary" that is used in this type of analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, theorist Diane Middlebrook writes, "Yet as the discipline of semiotics so compellingly demonstrates, language is fundamentally non-representational: the materials of a biograph[er, theorist or critic] are not life, but documents, and all documents refer within systems of language, within different discourses" (159).

truth-value and mathematically adds them and divides by two to come up with a median truth. The only truth that can be obtained from these two books is *in* these two books and not “tantalizing between.” Bhabha tells us, “... there is no knowledge – political or otherwise – outside representation” (23). A moment does not exist in and of itself, but only becomes real through the perception of human beings. This being the case, Devi and Eliade both render illustrations of the same moment.

Eckhoff is a good example of a critic who has allowed a binary logic to dominate her reading of both books. The “tantalizing between” view demonstrates that Eckhoff has assigned these books binary tags. The binaries *Devi/Eliade* and *It Does Not Die/Bengal Nights* are formed. Thinking of the texts in this way, Eckhoff constructs an opposition that is deleterious to the promise of a better understanding of the texts. In fact, their stories are not opposite renditions, as there are many points that coincide. For instance, they both note an instance of violence between Devi and her father. The authors are not completely at odds either, as both Eliade and Devi claim some sort of feeling for each other in both of their books. Critical interpretation following this kind of binary logic is reductive, not only in its pleas for truth, but even in the basic understanding of the texts. A non-binary logic is needed to detect and better understand subtle nuances, huge differences in stories and where the stories meet. Approaching each text on its own level free of imposed binaries will also enable a richer, non-egocentric perspective, as each book can be viewed as a separate entity, which cannot happen without a fundamental rejection of the objective/subjective binary and a will to unwork binaries in general.

Even the designation of the genre of *Bengal Nights* by the press reveals the shortcomings of binary thought. On the back of the 1995 University of Chicago edition of *Bengal Nights*, the book is categorized as “semiautographical”: “Set in 1930s Calcutta, this semiautobiographical novel by the world-renowned scholar Mircea Eliade details the passionate love affair of Alain, a young French engineer, and Maitreyi, the daughter of his Indian employer.” One might preliminarily note the complexity of this category by realizing that the designation of genre on the upper-left side of the book is “fiction.” The autobiography is defined, “a history of a person’s life written or told by that person.” What then might be termed “semiautobiographical?” It might be defined as a book that draws upon history for a fictional story, but this seems too general to be of use to this project. The genre might be defined as a fictional work that coincides with history in some parts and not in others, that is, an autobiography with fictional elements, but this again seems too general. Inventing a possible definition becomes necessary because there is no dictionary definition. The term cannot be easily defined because it falls outside of the binary of true/false. A semiautobiography is both true *and* false. What are the implications of a book that is partly true and partly false?

Semiautobiography aside for a moment, the term autobiography itself has drawn criticism from proponents of the postmodern. The definition of autobiography is always a matter of debate, as theorist James Olney writes:

This is one of the paradoxes of the subject: everyone knows what autobiography is, but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement. In any case, wherever and on whatever grounds we may wish to assign priority and to whatever books we may be willing to grant the title the practice of autobiography has been with us for a long time, and it is with us in generous supply today. (7)

Implied in the word autobiography is a problematic synonymy between author and text

that becomes problematic in the postmodern world. Theorist Robert Smith says, "Autobiography's distinction is in narrowing the gap between author's name and text's title: in principle, the name is title of both text and author," (71). The autobiography is not a person translated into text; instead, it is the collective perceptions of a person as remembered at a certain moment invented into a continuous narrative. In Eliade's case, *Bengal Nights* is not even this, as the continuous narrative does not necessarily reflect even his own collective perceptions.

Eliade did not begin his project solely in an attempt to reconstruct an accurate recounting of history; he wrote *Bengal Nights* in order to win a contest. Diane Wood Middlebrook points out the inherent economic motivation of an autobiography published by the author, "To whom are the author's words supposedly addressed<sup>9</sup>? The biographer as biographer has many rationales for what "he" is doing, but in the background of every book is a contract which places it in the medium of the marketplace," (156). In Eliade's case, there is no contract, but there is a prize. The prize is awarded to the best story, not necessarily to the story perceived as most accurate. Because of the economic motivation behind the composition of *Bengal Nights*, Eliade had no financial reason to attempt to accurately render history. If he was genuinely trying to reconstruct history, he was operating primarily from other motives.

Comparing Eliade's account to reality in search of an objective view will be unfruitful, as whatever information might be dug up will be hearsay and subjective. Instead of donning microscopes in pursuit of what actually happened, it is better to ask

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<sup>9</sup> Theorist T.L. Broughton writes, "Autobiography, in its modern, introspective form at least, situates itself at the very juncture of the public world of announcement and the private world of self-analysis and meditation," (77). The act of writing for any audience will inevitably structure what is said. Moving an event from a private space to a public space metamorphoses the narrative.



the question, “Why is Eliade’s text presented in such a way?” Eliade recounts the story of his experience in the Dasgupta household in such a way that he mixes his fantasies and thoughts with his experience, but every experience is remembered in this way. Human experience is not objective; hence any recounting of human experience *cannot* be objective. Theorist Louis Mink writes:

Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story. There are hopes, plans, battles and ideas, but only in retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive, and ideas seminal. (123)

Memory consists of experience and thoughts, and perhaps presenting his novel as semiautobiographical allows Eliade to present his novel in a way that mixes thoughts, fantasies and experiences instead of trying to tell the real story as the ideal of objectivity demands, even as flawed or impossible as that demand is. Even if Eliade were trying to reconstruct an objective narrative, he would have still failed because:

The autobiographer has always had to consider how to manage, and whether to dramatize, the discontinuities inherent in autobiographical recreation. The most basic discontinuities are the intermittences of memory. Autobiographies are always what Morris calls ‘first of all exercises in recollection – recollection in its simplest conception, as the tactic the mind employs to mitigate the destructive powers of time.’ But recollection in autobiography is never simple, always the process Berdyaev describes: ‘Such a cognitive process is not a mere remembering or recapitulation of the past: it is a creative act performed at the present moment.’ And the first question is whether to dramatize the act. Some do not. (Hart 234)

One can try to bring the past to life, but that act is an expression of the present and therefore untrue to the past and all its perceptions, knowledge and myriad complexities. Theorist Robert Smith writes, “Autobiography and its theory are to wean themselves off their fantasies of a serene history of the self and face up to the problematics of a narrative

of the subject” at which point autobiographical theory would cease to be autobiographical theory (57).

In *Bengal Nights*, there is a fluctuation between the author trying to be objective and the author denying that objectivity<sup>10</sup>. First, the author denies an accurate rendering of his memory and “fact” by consciously choosing to change the names he remembers into pseudonyms. He has not forgotten that the family he stayed was the Dasgupta family and not the Sen family any more than he has forgotten that his name is Mircea and not Alain. “Why does Eliade tamper with such things?” one might ask and one answer is that he did not want his text to be mistaken as an objective text by those who would classify it as such. From the start, Eliade denies that his work is objective. However, he makes constant reference to a diary that his character Alain looks through in order to obtain more accurate information. He includes the diary, the type of text he asserts to be first hand and objective in his novel. Eliade neither assigns a total truth-value to his rendition of events, nor does his story stand as pure fiction. In this way, he centers his text between non-fiction and fiction, perhaps in the hope that the reader will take his fantasy for reality. Whatever the intention, the “semiautobiographical” disclaimer leads people to take for non-fiction what he himself would consider fiction. For example, Ian Buruma says, “*Bengal Nights* belongs to a popular subgenre of confessional literature<sup>11</sup>” (27). A

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<sup>10</sup> A momentary pause is needed in order to consider the fact that Eliade has published an autobiography. The autobiography does not have much bearing on the logic of *Bengal Nights* mostly because the account of the events at the Devi household is at best vague. One might turn to his published journals, but the first recorded events come well after the events in *Bengal Nights*. There is not enough substance to his accounts to call them renditions of the same moment considered here. The unwillingness of Eliade to attempt a project concerning the events at the Devi household with the goal of recreating the actual events is apparent. His autobiography is interesting not because of the picture of the Devi household it draws, but for other reasons.

<sup>11</sup> Theorist Leigh Gilmore says, “Authority in autobiography springs from its proximity to the truth claim of the confession, a discourse that insists upon the possibility of telling the whole truth while paradoxically frustrating that goal through the structural demands placed on how one confesses.” In essence, the “whole

confession by definition must be devoid of fiction or else it can no longer be considered a confession. Devi, I think sees this most clearly as she is compelled to write her own version of what happened in an attempt to separate Eliade's experience from his thoughts and fantasies.

What is left to analyze then, is where each of their versions coincide and where they depart from one another and then to ask the question, "Why?" The goal of this reading strategy is not to find truth, but instead to find out which events they considered important and why. In this way the tension between Devi and Eliade can be discovered in order to take up Bhabha's project of focusing on "moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (1), so that a productive analysis can occur.

Related to the true/false binary is the objective/subjective dichotomy. Upon a close examination of specifics in a work, a particular fact or instance must always be called objective or subjective. Traditionally in positivistic western culture, the negative value is assigned to subjectivity (although this is being reversed in some movements), which is considered a pollutant. Something that is considered to be objective is completely ruined by even a little bit of subjectivity because something objective is by definition not subjective. Two things defined against each other cannot be mixed. In the same way, a little bit of falsehood completely ruins a truth. The construction of such binaries is rigid and so when *Bengal Nights* is said to be "semiautobiographical,"

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truth" cannot be told because of structural, political and linguistic limitations. Theorist Geoffrey Harpham goes on to say, "One of the late Paul de Man's most ingeniously counterintuitive suggestions was that autobiography produces life rather than the other way round; or, in his words, 'whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium.' We might translate and normalize de Man's paradox by saying that lives that at some point issue in autobiography are typically lives lived in anticipation of that fact, lived in consciousness of their own narratability."

problems arise. The terms autobiographical and biographical are generally equated with truth. In the library, such texts are listed as non-fiction. Once a bit of fantasy is introduced and the autobiography becomes the “semiautobiography,” the book’s non-fiction status is no longer viable. But because the term autobiographical is so strongly associated with truth, it seems that many readers prefer to ignore the pollutant “semi,” and view *Bengal Nights* as true. An anonymous critic calls *Bengal Nights*, “a thinly disguised autobiographical novel” (Rev. of *Bengal Nights: A Novel* 56). A description such as this dismisses the fictive element that is part of Eliade’s novel. This readerly tendency is ironically documented in Devi’s text in a conversation between Amrita and Sebastian. Sebastian would rather assume a truth-value to Euclid’s book than not. He is shocked when Amrita challenges the accuracy of his account: “You mean it’s not true?” (Devi 12).

Perceptions of truth are only defined in relation to what is false. Because of this system, a half-truth has no place, as we see with the semiautobiographical. A half-truth cannot be defined against falsehood because it is partly false and so not an opposite value. If in a binary one side is positive and the other negative, what then of the middle space? The answer comes from a refrain from a song by Johnny Mercer that Bhabha quotes: “Don’t mess with Mister In-be-tween” (xiv). There is no room for a middle space in the binary. Amrita tells Euclid, “Mircea, I am telling you, fantasy is beautiful and truth is more beautiful, but half truth is terrible” (Devi 255). K.E. Fleming writes, “Eliade’s offense was not novelistic embellishment but rather its reverse: Had *Bengal Nights* not retained so many truths, it would have been far less damaging” (393). The

system is rearranged from true(+) and false(-) to true(++), false(+) and half-truth(-)<sup>12</sup>.

The middle value, when recognized, gains the worst stigma in the compromised binary.

### Moving Toward the Texts

Eliade's description in his *Autobiography* of events in the Dasgupta household is rather bare, but he does speak of writing *Maitreyi* (also *Bengal Nights*). Eliade writes:

....little by little I found myself again in that fabulous time in Bhawanipore, and I realized that no longer was I writing a novel as I had intended, but a confession. Often I copied whole pages from *The Journal*, and if that journal for the summer of 1930 had been more extensive, perhaps I would have transcribed it in its entirety ... Sitting in front of those blank pages, writing about people and events that had played such a decisive role in my youth, it was impossible for me to "invent." I changed the names of the characters, of course, except for Maitreyi and her sister Chabu, but I let myself give correct dates, addresses, and telephone numbers. Likewise, I changed the occupations of Dasgupta and the narrator, and I drastically modified the conclusion, as if I wished to separate myself definitively from Maitreyi. (*Autobiography* 240)

He claims that he would have transcribed his journals in entirety if they were longer rather than writing *Maitreyi*. *Maitreyi*, however, is not a simple extension of his journals.

One wonders what exactly Eliade added to his journals to make his story longer. He claims he lacked the ability to invent, but invent he did. He does not invent new names for Maitreyi or Chabu however. Exactly what else he invented cannot be known certainly, but this information is useful to a better understanding of the texts.

Sebastian, in *It Does Not Die*, tells Amrita that her name is not changed in Euclid's book because, "He was not able to get away from the magic of your name" (Devi 14). In Eliade's "semiautobiographical" novel, he sees fit to assign most of the characters in his book names different from those they held as people he actually knew, but Maitreyi and Chabu are assigned the same name in both Eliade's experience (as

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<sup>12</sup> Also half-falsity

recorded in *Autobiography*) and in his novel. Eliade might have done this for the reason stated in Devi's book, that is, because of some ultra-romantic notion, but the "magic-name" answer seems like a cover for a larger reason, perhaps betraying a desire for a sexual conquest on Eliade's part that never actually occurred. Alain, Eliade's semi-equivalent in *Bengal Nights*, conquers Maitreyi, a fictional fact that seems to show a desire to do so on Eliade's part. Perhaps it is a nostalgic desire for things to have gone differently in the past that drives Eliade to leave Maitreyi's name alone. Leaving Maitreyi's name unchanged contributes to the illusion of fusion between Maitreyi Devi and Maitreyi Sen<sup>13</sup>.

The aforementioned quote from Eliade's *Autobiography* states that he did not change Maitreyi's or Chabu's names, but he does not give a reason at that point. Later, he says:

And of course I bathed that faraway world in a pale golden light, radiated from memories and melancholia. But it is no less true that if it were to have been read by certain persons in Calcutta, the novel would have needed no key to have been deciphered. I never thought, however, about the possibility of its being read in Calcutta. In fact, I never thought about its being read by strangers in Bucharest where I was writing it. I simply did not "visualize" a public. At most, I wondered what my friends would think, should the novel have the luck to receive the prize and be published. I could not even say that I wrote it for myself or for Maitreyi. I wrote it somewhat "impersonally," as a testimony *in aeternum*.  
(Eliade, *Autobiography* 240)

Eliade says that he neither expected the book to be read in India, nor was he particularly imagining any audience. He also tries to establish a truth-value to his work. He speaks of memory and sadness and says his work is "decipherable" without a key, to "certain persons," that is. "Indeed, you hardly need a key to identify the characters [in *Bengal*

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<sup>13</sup> Buruma writes, "Eliade appears to have stuck closely to the facts, as he saw them" (27). Despite the hesitating way in which the sentence is phrased, the critic is equating *Bengal Nights* with a non-fiction historical document of the time he spent in the Devi household.

*Nights*]: Eliade himself became a Frenchman called Alain and Surendranath Dasgupta became an engineer, named Narendra Sen, but most of the other people, including Maitreyi, kept their own names” (27), writes Buruma. The statement by this critic demonstrates the erroneous truth-value that comes to be associated with *Bengal Nights*. It is interesting to note that Maitreyi “kept” her own name in Eliade’s novel, as if Devi herself had some say in what Eliade did or did not write. Again, Eliade remains unclear about how close he sticks to his memory of the events in the Dasgupta household. The final sentence of the quote is tantalizingly ambivalent. What exactly is an “impersonal testimony?” The word “testimony” is associated with a very high truth-value, but appended with the word “impersonally,” the force is taken from the word. There is an intentional ambivalence in Eliade concerning his experience at the Dasgupta household both in his *Bengal Nights* and *Autobiography*.

It is useful to reflect on the names he did change from his experiences to his story. The change from Mircea to Alain can be innocently explained as a protection of the author. However, Eliade is careful to change both the first and last names of his guru and his guru’s wife and the character of Khoka remains the same in both Eliade’s and Devi’s accounts. The precaution seems to have been taken on account of threat. The question must be asked, “What might have Mircea feared from Dasgupta that he need not have feared from Khoka and Maitreyi?” The answer seems to be legal action. Khoka is portrayed as very poor in both Eliade’s and Devi’s accounts and so could not have been seen as a huge legal threat. Perhaps Eliade does not fear Maitreyi because she is a woman who does not mix in the same male circles<sup>14</sup>. Maitreyi, though a highly respected

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<sup>14</sup> Carmel Berkson who believes *It Does Not Die* is a “latter-day diatribe, a grandmother’s emotional fixation on events long past, the sad but natural consequence of her Indian upbringing,” writes, “Devi

scholar, is not perceived as posing enough of a legal threat for Eliade to change her name. Amrita asks, “Isn’t it almost libel?” (Devi 14), and one who is familiar with the law might raise the objection that the story is, though “semiautobiographical,” mainly a piece of fiction. Critic Anita Desai writes, “... twenty years later [Eliade] wrote [*Bengal Nights*], scandalously altering his own name but not hers” (44). It seems that the semi-fictional status of Eliade’s *Bengal Nights* (Euclid’s book), might have been intended to protect the author. After all, Eliade’s character is not Maitreyi Devi, but Maitreyi Sen, and in the legal world, would this not make quite a difference? Eliade’s reason might not have been consciously malignant at all. He might have neglected to change their names out of colonial arrogance, oblivious to any harm he might cause to them.

In *It Does Not Die*, Devi subtly gibes at Eliade in her mimicking of name changing. Devi changes her own name and the name of her little sister in her account, but changes Mircea Eliade to Mircea Euclid. She is obviously aware that the majority of her reading public will know that Euclid is in fact Eliade and that Amrita is the pseudonym she takes on, so the changing of names has nothing to do with shielding identities. The changing of names however, has an unfortunate latent effect. In her mimicry of Eliade, she draws the same criticism about truth-value. She has neither changed all the names, nor has she left them all alone. This decision on her part introduces the pollutant of half-truth, which might sometimes have a negative effect on her account<sup>15</sup>. Devi’s project is also fiction, but if *It Does Not Die* is supposed to be a

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remains unaware of the pathetic contrast between her self-indulgence and Eliade’s stature” (62). This statement is made without knowledge of, or without taking into account, Devi’s stature in India.

<sup>15</sup> Desai writes, “Like Eliade, [Devi] changed her own name—her heroine is called Amrita—but did little to conceal his, wittily calling him “Mircea Euclid.” One can see in this a small pathetic act of revenge; but Maitreyi is so disarmingly open about her emotions that her book goes far beyond any act of vengeance” (44). This critic forgives Devi the name changing, but other critics may not necessarily follow suit.



project of revision, it should have freed itself of obvious ambiguities. It is also important to note the genre designation in Devi's subtitle, which she did not add – romance.

The fact that Devi's text was published after Eliade's assigns several pejorative tags to Devi's text, which is unfortunate and false. Devi published her book after Eliade published his book, and so a reader's first instinct may be to call Devi's text reactive. Buruma's review in his article "Indian Love Call" reads, "Her angry response is naive, and rather Indian" (27). His apparent racism aside, Devi's text can be called reactive in that she did not simply publish her account of the events she remembered, but did so only as a response to Eliade's novel. However, because her book is reactive and published second does not invalidate her account. She, as can be reasonably expected, concentrates in *It Does Not Die*, on those issues that she wishes to refute and expands on her view of Eliade instead of writing oblivious to the presence of *Bengal Nights*. Her book is published second, but her book carries no less weight on that account.

One of the first things that Amrita seeks to refute in Devi's book is Mircea Euclid's story's claim that she has slept with him. Amrita is concerned that the character of Maitreyi in *Bengal Nights* has become what other people perceive as her. She might have been concerned with ideas of honor or that her career might be harmed by a perception of her that defies the social ideals of her audience. It is more important to understand that she actively seeks to distance Eliade's portrayal of her from herself. The fact that Eliade calls the character in his book (Maitreyi) by the same name as Devi (Maitreyi) adds to the illusion that they are one and the same, which of course has its parallel with Eliade (Mircea) and Euclid (Mircea) in Devi's novel.

The conversation that ensues between Amrita and Sergui Sebastian sheds light on the idea of fictional representations and their real counterparts. Sebastian calls Amrita “the heroine of a fairytale” (Devi 12). Even though he understands that Euclid’s book is a fairy tale, he tells her, “Everyone in my country knows you” (Devi 12). The heroine of Euclid’s fairy tale has mixed with Amrita in the perception of the reading public in the countries where Euclid’s book is available. The fictional status of Euclid’s book is acknowledged, but is not taken to heart, as the fairy tale projection of Amrita is taken to be the equivalent of Amrita herself.

Eliade’s account of the affair between Alain and Maitreyi Sen is much different than Devi’s account of what occurred between Amrita and Mircea Euclid. Fleming writes, “The fictive Alain ... is far more successful in his amorous pursuits than was his prototype” (391). It is Maitreyi who approaches him in his own chamber and undresses herself for Alain’s perusal. This “spontaneous gesture,” Alain tells the reader, “exceeded my every hope” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 111). This fantasy entails more than just the conquest of a young Indian maiden; instead, it is part of a larger fairy tale in which the colonizer sees himself as the beneficial conqueror who is greatly admired by the conquered. Fleming writes, “For Maitreyi was as much symbolic as specific, both an Orientalist fantasy and a male fantasy” (392), as indeed she is portrayed by Eliade. Alain likes the fact that Maitreyi offers herself to him physically because such willingness serves to sustain the myth that he is appreciated. It is not enough for the colonizer to conquer to please his ego; he must hear agreement from the conquered that he is superior. The encounter takes place in the part of the Sen household that he has been assigned. The foreigner in India living in the Sen household takes the offering before him. In this

way, Alain is able to feel that he has conquered both India and the Sen household. The fact that he believes her to be a virgin plays into this colonial fantasy as the myth of the pure indigenous virgin. Desai writes, “Eliade’s novel is a disturbing mixture of the racial and colonial attitudes of the day and a lush romanticism” (43). Sexual conquest by the colonizer is interpreted as a sign of conquest in general.

Furthermore he writes, “I took her, blindly, and no trace of the memory has remained” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 112). The author’s description of his experience with Maitreyi is telling. The word “blindly” lends a note of brutality to his description, and yet he claims to have no other memory than this. That he claims to have no memory of such an event seems to reflect the fairy tale status of the event. For all his attention to detail, he tells the reader next to nothing about one of the pivotal events of his narrative. Echoes of the vagueness with which Eliade recalls his experience with Maitreyi Devi in his *Autobiography* can be heard: “...love grew and was fulfilled as it was destined to be” (Eliade, *Autobiography* 185). The words in his autobiography are suggestive and elusive and his reluctance to say anything substantial on the subject does not escape notice. The narrator Alain also claims to be looking through a journal and it seems odd that the narrator would not have entered something in his diary concerning this event. An objection to this interpretation might be put into the form, “Maybe he left out detail in regard to the love scene because it was too personal or because he didn’t want to offend Maitreyi Devi or because maybe he really did forget.” The narrator is free with details pertaining to his personal life throughout the book, and to hold back at such a point in the novel seems less than likely. As far as Eliade offending Maitreyi, he is probably aware that sparing details after such a claim is not helpful; after all, he did not change her name

in his rendition of events. The likelihood of intrusion by the fog of memory seems extremely convenient, but not impossible. Alain's conquest of Maitreyi Sen seems more than likely to be Eliade's regret at not having conquered Maitreyi Devi.

There is only one answer that, although unlikely, could possibly give a less negative tinge to Eliade's account. If Eliade meant the sexual parts of *Bengal Nights* to be the fictional parts of his "semiautobiographical" novel, then he might have simply been raising the stakes. Devi's account in *It Does Not Die* gives readers, that is western or westernized readers, little cause to be upset with Euclid. Euclid abandons the woman he says he loves with little persuasion, but he has not offended her physically according to her filial and cultural systems, which would have numerous deleterious effects in her society. That Alain sleeps with Maitreyi and then abandons her increases the possibility of inciting outrage in western readers because the effects take a more concrete form in the western mind. Some readers may see the magnitude in the offense he commits against Maitreyi without the interpolation of sexual union, but many readers would be unable to grasp this idea. If Alain had not slept with Maitreyi, then perhaps the negative feelings many readers have about Alain after he abandons Maitreyi would not be as pronounced.

Contrary to readings of the texts that focus on truth, most of the tension between Maitreyi and Alain in Eliade's account is the result of miscommunication. A reader of *Bengal Nights* does not have to read very carefully to see that Alain's reactions to Maitreyi are quick, ill-thought and Eurocentric. Maitreyi asks Alain, "Why do you not want to understand? Why do you prefer to be disgusted by me than to understand?" (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 121). This idea that it is Alain's preference to not understand her sheds additional light on the relation between Alain and Maitreyi as that of

colonizer/colonized. The colonizer has no need to understand the colonized because it is the colonizer who is in power, and the one in power has no need to understand those beneath. It is instead the colonized who should be forced to understand the colonizer. This assumption of power on Alain's part is a signal to reassess some of the previous points about *Bengal Nights* and *It Does Not Die*.

It seems strange even to the western reader that Alain takes advantage of the hospitality of the Sens to the extremity that he does. If Alain is indeed assuming a position of superiority, it comes as no surprise that he takes liberties with his host's daughter. If he considers himself above the father, what then is the value of the daughter? The sexual conquest of the colonized is simply an assertion of power. The ease with which Maitreyi throws off her own moral concerns to join with Alain shows the desire some members of the colonized elite have to be colonized. In *Bengal Nights* Alain is married to Maitreyi, but it remains unlikely that the fictitious Maitreyi would disrespect her parents by getting married surreptitiously. Considering the ease with which Alain throws off Maitreyi at the end of the novel, the erratic binding effect of such a union is clearly demonstrated. Perhaps the reason Alain did not wish or try to obtain a legal marriage is that he had no intention of honoring it. The wedding that is not legal in the eyes of the colonizer is not serious.

Despite the colonial arrogance and assumption of power displayed by Alain and Euclid, there seems to be a considerable amount of doubt behind their attitudes, which can be seen in the form of paranoia. Paranoia reflects, among other things, the instability of the colonial imagined relationship between colonizer/colonized because a stable belief in the colonized's desire to be colonized would leave no room for paranoia. In his

*Autobiography*, Eliade writes, “I realized that the attitude of the Indians had changed: no longer were they paralyzed by the prestige of the whites; basically, they were no longer afraid of them” (Eliade, *Autobiography* 180). Eliade sheds light on the controlling mechanism of the colonized/colonizer relationship: fear. The instability of the mechanism leaves the colonizer paranoid.

Although Khoka never does Alain harm, and in fact is the only contact between Maitreyi and Alain, Alain says of Khoka, “He despised us all, even though he was forever laughing with everyone, feigning affection” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 115). Those who think of themselves as superiors are constantly on the lookout for those who are jealous of them, and even when no such jealousy or threat surfaces, they create examples. The reason Alain thinks that Khoka despises him is probably no more than a projection of jealousy. Khoka is poor and Indian, traits that Alain would consider inferior<sup>16</sup>.

This paranoia shows up especially in relation to the sexual relationship between Alain and Maitreyi. Alain says, “Sexual possession – even that obtained in the most perfect trust – is hardly effective proof of loyalty. Cannot that same sincerity be offered to another, to others? My blissful happiness and the confidence that had been accumulated over so many months of love ... were as nothing” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 120-21). Alain does not even consider the fact that they have been married, another sign of the lack of value he assigns to their marriage, and takes neither the marriage nor their sexual union as part of a relationship based on trust. He is paranoid because he cannot have the control over Maitreyi that he wants, perhaps the same control the colonizer

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<sup>16</sup> Angered by an innocent intimacy between Khoka and Maitreyi, Alain thinks, “I saw [Khoka’s] black, dirty hoof, darkened by the sun and from walking on tar, come into sudden contact with Maitreyi’s soft flesh ...” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 70). One might argue that his racism is provoked by anger, but why then

wishes to have over the colonized. Trust, for Alain, is little more than a large measure of control<sup>17</sup>. His lack of trust in her is readily apparent as the feelings of love he has for her that one would assume to be strong are “nothing” in the face of his paranoia (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 121). Maitreyi risks much in her liaison with Alain and he still does not trust her; one is forced to ask, “How much does it take?”

Another example of Alain’s paranoia occurs when Udaj Shankar visits the Sen residence. Alain says:

I would have been happy if Maitreyi’s expression had betrayed her feelings for him – at a single blow, I would have been cut free of my attachment. The instant I knew myself replaced by another, my love would have dissolved. If Maitreyi could not arm herself against Udaj Shankar’s power with her fidelity to me, she deserved to be abandoned, like the most wretched of women.  
(Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 126)

The paranoia apparent in just this fragment is astounding. Again the fragility of whatever feelings he has for Maitreyi can be seen as he admits his love can disappear in an instant. His paranoia in the situation is absurd because there are many other people around and it is unlikely that such a betrayal could take place in the midst of such a crowd in a Brahmin household. He also does not tell her what is going on in his mind. Instead, he tries to “hide [his] unease” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 126).

Maitreyi is in no way aware that her conversation with Udaj jeopardizes her relationship with Alain. If Alain had told her what he was feeling, then it is doubtful that she would have even approached Udaj. He also suspects Maitreyi of something of which he would not suspect a white woman. Earlier in the novel, Alain says of his suspicions, “I could not have had such suspicions of a white woman. I knew well the superficiality

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did his anger take the form of racism? It is not in a single line that Alain’s disdain for the poor, the dark-skinned and Indians can be seen, but in the repetition of these ideas throughout the text.

<sup>17</sup> Control, it might be noted, is what the colonial philosophy demands most – not respect or trust.

and capriciousness of our women, but I also knew that a certain self-respect and sense of moderation would have stopped them giving themselves to the merest stranger” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 120). Besides the fact that his idea about white women is flawed, as any universal statement is flawed, he attributes his idea to white women having self-respect and a sense of moderation. By suspecting Maitreyi of being capable of giving herself to the merest stranger, he is saying that she lacks both self-respect and a sense of moderation. Though he says he loves Maitreyi, he sees no error in thinking of her in racist and sexist terms. Because of this instability, the full spectrum of destructive binaries deserves attention. Alain is not only unreasonable in his attitude toward Maitreyi; he is racist in his attitude toward her as well.

There is an account of Euclid’s paranoia in *It Does Not Die* that nicely sums up the idea of paranoia in both books. Khoka is joking with Amrita, and Euclid does not understand what is being said. After Amrita explains the dialogue that has taken place between herself and Khoka, Euclid asks, “Tell me, what is the inner meaning of it all?” (Devi 16). Amrita then characterizes Euclid saying of him, “That was Mircea—always searching for inner meanings” (Devi 16). Euclid then calls Khoka a “buffoon” (Devi 16). What prompts Euclid to glumness and nastiness is that he does not understand what is being said. His inability to understand what is happening threatens his superiority complex, and so he dismisses Khoka as a buffoon. Alain’s idea of superiority/inferiority is challenged and instead of reevaluating his ignorant perspective, he is moved to anger. The idea of the inner meaning should come as no surprise, as Euclid reads much into the events that is quite probably not there.



The closing events of *Bengal Nights* show the reality of how Alain perceives the relationship between himself and Maitreyi. It is understandable that Alain leaves when he is asked to by Narendra Sen, but his continued refusal to make contact with Maitreyi is anything but understandable. "Instead of going to his beloved's rescue ... he flees to the mountains and hides in the forests, to lick his wounds," writes Desai (44). Despite Maitreyi's numerous attempts to contact him, he stubbornly denies her. Soon after, he travels to the mountains to forget about her and has yet another irresponsible affair with another woman. Apparently Alain does not consider the marriage and sexual union between himself and Maitreyi binding in any way. Desai writes, "The romantic hero is overjoyed to find himself set free ... In the event, it had been to him 'a sentence of death' from which he 'was saved.' Alas poor Maitreyi" (44). For all of his paranoia about Maitreyi, it is he and not she that betrays the relationship. From the fact that it is Alain that betrays the fidelity of the relationship, it can be seen that his past paranoia concerning Maitreyi was but a reflection of himself and his own inability to be part of such a relationship. He views love and marriage as temporary things, whereas the title of Devi's book betrays her view of love as something that does not die, which escapes temporal boundaries.

Alain describes Maitreyi's attempts to contact him as somewhat desperate, and in this description again there may be detected a sense of arrogance. Alain is not worried about his ability to survive without Maitreyi, but reads into Maitreyi an inability to survive without him. He says, "She had asked me not to leave for five days. She knew nothing of my escapade (which was as well, she would have thought I had killed myself and who knows what folly she might have committed...)" (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 156).

He implies that if Maitreyi thought he were dead, she would with tear-filled eyes dispose of herself. This depiction of the “hysterical” female who cannot live without Alain, the object of her eternal passion, is the height of male and colonial hubris.

He goes further, presuming that he “will instinctively know the exact moment of her death” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 175). He still claims a spiritual connection with Maitreyi though he has completely forsaken her both physically and emotionally. Maitreyi, in another “desperate” attempt to unite with him gives “herself to the fruit seller” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 175). It seems that after himself, Alain could envision only a downhill road. The lowly fruit seller is all that is left for Maitreyi after Alain leaves. Amrita objects to such presumptuousness, as is elucidated in her conversation with Sebastian. He presumes to say, “What a pity your father spoilt your life” (Devi 14). That he attributes this to her father instead of Euclid is troubling, but since his whole point is erroneous, there is little cause to battle over it. Amrita replies:

how much do you know of life? Who can spoil my life? My life is rich. I have built up an ideal home. I live happily, surrounded by children and grandchildren. So many persons love and respect me. Granted the unbounded affection of my Master, about whom Mircea was so jealous, I have experienced ecstasy that is beyond the world of mind and words. (Devi 14)

Given Amrita’s rebuttal, it seems that Devi’s account differs from Eliade’s account on yet another level. Alain can envision no future for Maitreyi after he leaves her, and even the review on the back of the 1995 University of Chicago edition of the book says, “*Bengal Nights* is ... a cruel account of the wreckage left in the wake of a young man’s self-discovery.” There is no vision of life after Alain leaves the Sen residence, as if all of India remains static without his presence. It never occurs to Alain that life goes on without him, just as India and Pakistan survive without the colonizer.

That Alain considers himself superior to Maitreyi seems proven well enough, but it would be problematic in later discussion if it were not also stated that he feels superior to Chabu and Narendra Sen. As for Chabu, she dies on the same day Alain leaves on his journey. He does not say that he attributes her death to his physical abandonment of the city, but it is implied. It is as if powers of life and death are somehow connected with him. Alain's negative descriptions of Narendra Sen are too numerous to be detailed here, but he finds the man disgusting, though he is drawn to him and sees him as his guru. For instance, Eliade writes in *Bengal Nights*, "I wondered how [Narendra Sen] could be so ugly, could lack expression so completely. He resembled a frog: bulging eyes, enormous mouth, round, black, iron pot of a head, low forehead and jet-black curls, squat body and sloping shoulders, protruding belly, short legs" (8). Eliade becoming an Indologist fits into this puzzle also. In this competition with his old guru, is there not a trace of, "I am better than you and so someday even you yourself will agree?" Bhabha writes, "...colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 86). Narendra Sen's erudition in general and mastery of his own culture threatens Eliade. The colonized must fall into the system of control of the colonizer, mimicking the colonizer, but the colonized must never be equal, and certainly not better, than the colonizer. In his *Autobiography*, Eliade writes, "Dasgupta would acknowledge me someday as his true disciple—but this would take place on another plane, *in aeternum* and not *in saeculum*" (189). The illusion of superiority when not granted in life does not hamper the delusion; it is instead postponed to after life's end. This attitude can also be seen in Alain when he considers Maitreyi. Maitreyi says, "I am a philosopher ... I like to dream, to think and to write poetry"

(Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 37), which elicits a sarcastic response from Eliade<sup>18</sup>. He is the philosopher and so Maitreyi cannot be a philosopher.

One element of *Bengal Nights* that at least partly saves Eliade from being completely fused with his character Alain is the honesty of the prose. If the reader takes Alain to be a partial portrait of Eliade, then the reader is forced to question the depiction of his character Alain. Alain shows the reader that he is racist, paranoid and cruel. He does not try to hide these traits, but instead meticulously details them. Even the reader who blindly equates Alain and Eliade must wonder why he did not try to hide his disagreeableness. It is this “honesty of prose” that problematizes a reductive, purely negative picture of Eliade because of his association with his character Alain. Alain’s paranoia, however, does not save him from negative criticism.

### Othering Binaries

In speaking to Alain’s paranoia, the binary of virgin/whore is useful. This age-old dichotomy relates to marital rites and economic codes. In order to lose her virginity and not fall into the category of “whore,” a woman must be married. The binary is more complicated than that, but the definition works for the time being. The binary actually works into something like this:

Virgin  
Not mother/wife  
(Pure woman)

Not virgin  
Not mother/wife  
(Whore)

Virgin  
Mother/Wife  
(The Virgin Mary)

Not virgin  
Mother/Wife  
(Mother figure)

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<sup>18</sup> Desai writes, “[Alain] is speechless to discover [Devi] setting off with her father one day to give a public lecture on ‘the essence of beauty,’ since in his view her aspiration to philosophy is nothing more than a joke” (43).

Interestingly enough, the model is clearly different for men. It looks like this:

Virgin Not father/husband (Child)	Not virgin Not father/husband (Bachelor/Conqueror/Young man)
Virgin Father/Husband (God)	Not virgin Father/Husband (Father figure)

It is clear that Alain has internalized this model, as his all-or-nothing attitude toward Maitreyi is clear. He is not interested in Maitreyi unless she is a virgin, yet he himself is not a virgin. This virgin/whore dichotomy is being applied only to women in Alain's eyes.

In his autobiography, Eliade attaches a pedagogical value to the two women he speaks of in *Bengal Nights*. He writes, "I could not know it then, but eternal māyā, in her blind wisdom, had set those two girls on my path in order to find my true destiny" (Eliade, *Autobiography* 199). Maitreyi represents "'historical' India" and Jenny represents "eternal 'trans-historical' India" (Eliade, *Autobiography* 199). The two women of *Bengal Nights* have no other purpose but to set Mircea Eliade on his true path; they have no lives of their own. It might also be useful to point out that Eliade does not change Jenny's name in *Bengal Nights*. It seems that the patriarchal man/woman binary comes into play.

Attached to Alain's conception of what is European and what is Indian is the binary of civilized/primitive. An anonymous critic writes for the *Times Literary Supplement*, "... the oppositions between innocence and experience, civilization and barbarism, enchantment and disillusionment, are essentially naïve and never fully realized [in *Bengal Nights*]" (23). Just like any other binary, the positive attribute exists

only in relation to the negative attribute, so that what is European is only positive (civilized) if what is Indian is seen as negative (primitive): “For a long time, I was to flatter myself by thinking of our relationship as that of civilized man and barbarian” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 32). Desai writes, “This allegedly great love was marked, finally, by precisely the failings, the misunderstandings and the self-seeking fantasies that marked the whole colonial encounter” (45). Given Alain’s negative view of Indian people in general, it is not surprising that he accepts Narendra Sen’s invitation to live in his home. By surrounding himself with those whom he considers to be primitive, he is privy to a constant ego boost. How much more civilized must Alain have felt in the presence of Indians than in the presence of other Europeans? Which binary comes into play and with what emphasis depends on the situation. In the company of Indians, a European can simply summon the civilized/primitive dichotomy and feel superior, but in the presence of other Europeans, other binaries come into play, for example rich/poor or educated/worker, binaries that are superceded by the civilized/primitive dichotomy. That the Sens are well off does not interfere with Alain’s superiority complex, as he views Narendra as a brute even though he realizes the power that he can exercise over him.

In viewing Eliade’s and Devi’s texts together, the dichotomies of love/hate and past/present show a clear difference between the two accounts. Eliade’s text remains firmly planted in the past. Although the story is told as someone remembering her or his past, nothing of the time during which he tells the story is revealed. Certain emotions and thoughts are revealed, it is true, but nothing that can be anchored temporally. Again, perhaps, the function of the tag “semiautobiographical” comes into play. The author of a “semiautobiographical” novel need not worry about attaching herself or himself to the

novel because, although the author is saying in some ways the novel is true, there is a fundamental separation of the author and the corresponding character in the novel. In this way, Eliade escapes any obligation to involve himself personally in the story, that is, to speak of anything current in his reality.

Devi's text on the other hand, speaks of her present and her past. Devi involves the reader with her current life as well as her reminiscences. Most authors shy away from this approach, as they are unwilling to subject their personal lives to criticism. Devi does not follow the rigid chronological scheme that western writers tend to abide by, and it is probably this more than anything else that will make the western reader uncomfortable. Devi says, "I find no words to describe fully this flashing experience of the past" (Devi 18), and goes on to speak of different times in her life when past and present fused. Firdaus Azim writes, "Eliade had written in his native language and his book reveals Indian/Bengali culture through a woman to his countrymen—performing an anthropological task. Maitreyi has also written in her native Bengali, trying to recreate for herself and her readers an experience in her youth, trying to draw past and present together. Her autobiography performs a more historical and cultural role, as it delves into the past to understand or explain the present" (1037). When it comes to writing about memories, the experience of remembering is most often sacrificed for the clean-cut narrative. It is more for the sake of convenience and clarity that the writer tends to organize memory in a way that seems to make sense, but Devi does not engage in this artifice. Devi escapes the past/present dichotomy because she embraces them both; this approach is in need of a new term. It would be easy to simply say that Devi's text is not chronological, hence subscribing to the order/chaos dichotomy, but her story is told in an

engaging fashion and with ease the reader is able to tell where the story has taken her or him. In this way, Devi invests much more of herself in her novel, which gives the reader much more information to critique, something perhaps Eliade was trying to avoid.

Neither novel abides by the love/hate binary. Though Alain abandons Maitreyi at the end of *Bengal Nights*, he never really comes to hate her. He says, “If I only could love [Maitreyi] ... But I do not love her!” (Eliade, *Bengal Nights* 156). He does not love her, yet he does not hate her. This attitude escapes the love/hate binary. Devi’s text is more interesting in that it is written much later after whatever experiences occurred that both writers shared. Because of the amount of time the author has had to distance herself from the past, in addition to the fact that she is married and has children, her narrative is much more interesting. Devi fluctuates in her attitude toward Eliade and though to some this inconsistency feels unprofessional, her inconsistent tone reflects her feelings and perhaps emotion in general more accurately. Amrita asks ironically, “Can there be any room for that twentythree year old boy in my fifty-eight year old life?” (Devi 14), and then goes on to make statements such as, “Love is deathless. My soul, held by him in that Bhowanipur house, still remains fixed” (Devi 218). This fluctuation between feelings of love and hate, present and past, and remembering and wishing to forget escapes the binaries usually called on to order a complicated event for ease of storytelling. Her reason for choosing to avoid trying to create an illusion of chronological order is summed up best in her own words, “I kept no journal—I am writing something that happened forty-two years ago, neither from a diary nor from exact memory—so I do not know whether the sequence of events is correct—sequence, that means one after the other, that is, what was *then* before or after, as *now* it has no before



nor after” (Devi 75). This concept of time is much different from the scheme most western books have because it does not assume history and life have an order and are somehow separate from present existence.

Kamani does a good job of discussing the ongoing contest these two books are pushed into. Western reviewers usually<sup>19</sup> champion Eliade and Devi is condemned, but in this contest something is lost. Devi did not live a life devoid of reflection or literary creation; in fact, she is an extremely well known writer in India. Both Devi and Eliade are respected scholars. It is important to recognize that there is no binary operating between them as far as education or prestige goes.

The major binary to take into consideration is that of colonizer/colonized. Alain, the white, colonial presence invests his ego and superiority in the inferiority of Indians. But inferiority and superiority are simple illusions constructed so that an individual may psychologically survive in a world of countless people. The ego of the colonized is affected by the binary structure imported from Europe as “modern” values creep in and Eurocentric binary structures take hold. Near the end of the story Mrs. Sen asks, “Why did [my husband] have to have a Frenchman in the house!” (Devi 207). It is possible that the presence of Euclid in the Sen household has helped some of the Sens to break free from the imported value system. Amrita says, “The British say, ‘Rule, Britannia, Rule the waves, Britons will never be slaves’—but look what they have done to others and then that is their pride—‘The sun never sets on the British Empire.’ Logic is seldom used” (Devi 158). The colonizer’s ego rests on being the colonizer, which means that the colonizer conquers, seeks control and colonizes because that is how the colonizer proves

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<sup>19</sup> If they took a “side,” many of the critics listed in the bibliography sided with Eliade in general. This does not mean that nobody took Maitreyi’s “side.”

that the colonial people are not fit to be colonized. Amrita sees the major problem with binary structures: they are illogical.

The texts *It Does Not Die* and *Bengal Nights* (because they both detail shared experiences) provide unique insight into the nature of binary oppositions. The two books preclude a reductive binary outlook. It is not a simple, reductive choice between which book is true, and which is false, but instead they must be looked at together in order to see where their stories and feelings depart from each other, so that the underlying structure can be seen and studied<sup>20</sup>. The texts presented by Devi and Eliade are intertextual and interdependent, rather than separate. Seeing these texts as a conversation instead of a contest allows a reader to better understand the texts. By studying the binary structures present in each text and juxtaposing them with the points in each book that escape binary oppositions, a more complex view of existence can be seen in the form of a nexus, and perhaps someday as a fractal, which would better reflect infinite complication.

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Irvine writes, “the stories, which must be read together, provide a wonderful study in contrasting cultures as well as an engaging love story” (111).

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