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Devadasi Defiance and The Man-Eater of Malgudi

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In 1947, after over 50 years of agitation and political pressure on the part of a committed group of Hindu reformers, the Madras legislature passed an act into law that would change forever the unique culture of the professional female temple dancers of South India. It was called the "Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act". Despite having the wholehearted support of the Indian women's movement of the time, the Act represented the imposition of androcentric values on a matrifocal and matrilineal tradition, a tradition which had for centuries managed to withstand the compulsions of Hindu patriarchy.¹ The devadasis were eventually forced to give up their profession and their unusual way of life. But the dance itself was not lost. It was, instead, reconstructed as a national treasure. One of the consequences of the 1947 Act is that, today in India and all over the world, the temple dance, once exclusively performed by devadasis, is dominated by women of the upper castes.

What I intend to do in the following pages is to explore the much suppressed history of the devadasis through a reading of R.K. Narayan's novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. It might seem strange to readers that I should press this wonderfully funny book into the service of my historical rescue because it is generally interpreted as a story about two male characters, Nataraj and Vasu. These characters are frequently understood as antagonists, with Nataraj symbolizing the harmony that Narayan is supposed to prefer and Vasu the chaos he apparently dislikes. There are alternative explanations. Fakrul Alam sees *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* as a "narrative of identification"² in which Nataraj struggles to incorporate the aggressiveness and spontaneity of Vasu into his own personality until he is able to emerge at the end of the tale, after Vasu destroys himself, as a "new, self-assured protagonist".³ M.M. Mahood focuses on the novel's politics, reading the encounter between Vasu and Nataraj as one that re-enacts the social and psychological processes of neo-imperialism.⁴ And U.P. Sinha explicates its mythic dimensions.⁵ All of these writers offer us legitimate and exciting approaches to *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, and my intention is not to supplant these readings.

But I would like to join the conversation by shifting the perspective from the masculine to that of the typically neglected feminine as it is articulated by the novel's devadasi character, Rangī.

The history of the temple dancers infiltrates this novel through Rangī. Although never actually called a devadasi, she is alternately identified as a 'public woman',⁶ "a woman of the temple" (p. 115), "a temple prostitute" (pp. 149-50), "a dedicated woman" (p. 116), and "a dancing woman" (p. 147), all of which epithets point to this South Indian profession and heritage. These are, of course, some of the more neutral definitions of Rangī that the novel offers. She is also described as "irresistible" (p. 115), a "notorious character" (p. 81), 'a perfect female animal' (p. 82), "the woman to avoid" (p. 114), "a goddess carved out of cinder" (p. 115), "the awful fleshy creature whom Sastri considered it a sin to look at" (p. 114), and in that unapologetic hyperbole so typical of Narayan's humour, "the worst woman who had ever come back to Malgudi" (p. 81). *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is wildly ambivalent about Rangī, and it is by investigating this ambivalence, by tracing its foundations both inside and outside the text, that I hope to demonstrate the potential of this devadasi character to unsettle the dominant mythic, ahistorical, conservative and patriarchal flow of Narayan's narrative.

The devadasi, a Sanskrit term that literally means "servant or slave of god", has fuelled the erotically charged imagination of Western man for about 400 years. Her appearance in Western writing is congruent with Europe's imperialist expansion into India. We see her, therefore, in early imperialist travel memoirs often as an emblem of the wealth to be found in the East. This is certainly how Domingos Paes chooses to describe the devadasis he encountered while accompanying the Portuguese envoy to the court of Krishnaraya at Vijayanagar, a kingdom which ruled over South India in the sixteenth century. His gaze fixes on the gold and precious gems that these women display on their bodies when they dance, attend on the god, or sit and chew betel in the presence of the king's wives. This latter activity, he informs us, is apparently an honour granted only to the devadasis of Vijayanagar. These women obviously amaze him. He writes,

It surely is a marvel that women of such a profession should obtain such wealth; for there are some among them who have had lands presented to them and litters and maid-servants without number. One woman in this city is said to possess 100,000 parados, about £25,000, and I can believe this from what I have seen.⁷

It is clear from this passage that for Paes the temple dancers were extraordinary not only for their prosperity, since the king's wives also displayed such extravagant affluence, but for the prosperity that they achieved by means of what seems to him to be prostitution. Paes was one of the first of a long line of writers – European and Indian – to label the devadasis prostitutes. That

this label does not fit snugly the community of devadasis that he saw in Vijayanagar is evident from his expressions of astonishment.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, when, after thirty years of residence in South India, Abbé Dubois wrote his *Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India*, he was undoubtedly following Paes's lead, for he too unabashedly assumes that the devadasis are prostitutes. And because of his ecclesiastical leanings, his assessment of their sexual behaviour is necessarily contemptuous. He calls them "strumpets" and "loose females" and uses adjectives like "lascivious" and "obscene" to characterize their singing.⁸ But there's more than simple disdain at work here, for at times the tone of his writing approaches bafflement:

They [the devadasis] are bred to this profligate life from their infancy. They are taken from any cast [sic], and are frequently of respectable birth. It is nothing uncommon to hear of pregnant women, in the belief that it will tend to their happy delivery, making a vow, with the consent of their husbands, to devote the child then in the womb, if it should turn out a girl, to the service of the Pagoda. And, in doing so, they imagine they are performing a meritorious duty. The infamous life to which the daughter is destined brings no disgrace on the family.⁹

Although the Abbé seems loathe to admit it, implicit in his depiction of the temple dancers is their honourable acceptance by the greater Hindu community of the late eighteenth century. And even the Abbé himself ultimately concedes that these women have their excellences. They are, he tells us, graceful dancers, they are elegant and refined in their public conduct and "decently clothed".¹⁰ When he compares them with "women of their stamp in Europe", whose "gross indecencies" and "lascivious airs" are "capable of inspiring the most determined libertine with disgust",¹¹ the reader begins to suspect that the devadasis represent a much more alien experience than his Christian belief structures can accommodate.

Although an equally but differently complicated figure for many Indian observers, the devadasi was nevertheless accorded a significant role in Hindu society prior to the mid-twentieth century. Texts on classical Indian dance from the 1950s up to the present day assure the reader that her profession was a highly regarded one. The typical picture of the devadasi in these books shows her fulfilling her temple duties – dancing, singing, and performing various religious rituals – while living out her life in a house inherited from her mother and situated in one of the four streets surrounding the temple. The devadasi was also granted tax-free land in exchange for her temple service, and it was from the cultivation of this land by agricultural labourers that much of her income was derived. We also see her as the glamorous and skilfully seductive companion (and sexual partner) of men of the upper classes. Reginald Massey and Rina Singha construct her along these lines in

their history of Indian dance:

It is plain ... that these devadasis were women of means. But this was not their only valuable possession. They were highly educated and polished in their manners and so able to provide their patrons with intellectual stimulation. This is the main reason why men of rank and learning resorted to them, as their own wives, being mainly confined to hearth and home, were sadly lacking in those qualities. It was, therefore, the accepted thing for these gentlemen to support such women privately, or to hire them from the temples.¹²

The devadasis, then, are often depicted as the rivals of more conventional women, particularly Hindu wives. Before we endorse such an image, however, we should also acknowledge that the patriarchal structures in place during the centuries long history of the temple dancers' culture affected the polished mistresses as well as the stay-at-home wives. Both groups of women had their choices and rewards determined by an overarching paternalist ideology and authority, and both contrived their own resistances to it. The scope for resistance and the possibility of self-sufficiency was, however, wider for the devadasis because their tradition was matrilineal, a situation which inevitably leads to the unusual valuing of the female over the male. Still, it would be short-sighted to assume that any group existing within an economy dedicated to the preservation of the interests of upper class men would be able to evade entirely its masculine priorities.

My essay has, until this moment, presented the devadasi culture as homogeneous. Beryl De Zoete writes that there were, in fact, many categories of devadasis. Some categories designated the manner of their dedication to the temple – whether they offered themselves for service, were sold to the temple, or “given as an endowment ... covered in jewels and rich in accomplishments” – and others indicated that they were paid regular wages as dancers, singers, and musicians.¹³ Massey and Singha delineate two other devadasi distinctions, *valangai* or right-hand and *idangai* or left-hand.¹⁴ The *valangai* were permitted by custom to consort with or dance for only the upper or right-hand castes, while the *idangai* catered to left-hand castes, which Massey and Singha identify as artisans. The devadasis, then, did not constitute a perfectly uniform people. They differentiated themselves according to their function in the temple, their status at the time of their dedication, their prescribed sexual partners and audiences, and even their regional affiliations.¹⁵ It is important to recognize the diversity existing in the devadasi community so that we do not fall into the error of assuming that they were all wealthy and privileged women who consorted solely with the affluent classes of the Hindu elite. Although neither De Zoete nor Massey and Singha ventures into the bleaker world of the kidnapped girl sold to the temple against her will or the devadasi who eked out a living among poorer peoples whose fortunes, along with hers, rose and fell in accordance with

apparently uncontrollable forces such as droughts, floods, and wars, these presences hover below the surfaces of their historical reconstructions. Any inquiry into the practices of these women must be careful not to see only those devadasis that the early imperialists saw – the immensely advantaged ones. For by doing so we erase those disadvantaged people whose lives are so often forgotten in our academic texts and discussions, and this is surely an act of intellectual imperialism, which reinscribes the hierarchies established by all previous imperialist projects.

We can say with some certainty, however, that devadasis, whatever their station or circumstance, shared a reputation for auspiciousness. Married to the deity of the temple in a ceremony that often resembled an upper-caste wedding, the devadasi acquired the title of *nitya sumangali*, which dance historian Ragini Devi translates as “eternally married”.¹⁶ The significance of that special position in Hindu society has been examined by Amrit Srinivasan in a recent article, the focus of which is the more privileged devadasis of Tamil Nadu who at one time had liberal access to the elite classes and perhaps could be said to belong to those classes themselves. She maintains that the temple dancer entered secular society as *nitya sumangali*, which meant that she could expect to be received with respect and courtesy into the Hindu community outside the temple precincts. Not only did she pursue her dance career in this environment, but she was also invited to the homes of the wealthier families of her locality, where she participated in those ceremonies that were usually reserved only for the *sumangalis* or married women of the household, that is, she sang songs at weddings and puberty ceremonies, received new bridegrooms and their relatives, and tied the customary red beads on to the marriage necklaces of the families’ daughters: “As a picture of good luck, beauty and fame the devadasi was welcome in all rich men’s homes on happy occasions of celebration and honour. Her strict professionalism made her an adjunct to conservative domestic society not its ravager.”¹⁷ Srinivasan further asserts that being *nitya sumangali* and dedicated to the temple deity also meant that the devadasi was not expected to perform those household tasks that were the province of her conventional counterpart in the society at large. She did not cook or clean for any men, not for her own brothers and uncles, who frequently lived in the same house as she, nor for her male dance guru.¹⁸

Srinivasan’s decidedly positive depiction of the temple dancers, and her determination, evident from the above quotation, to reclaim that tradition from those who would condemn the devadasi as the “ravager” of her people obviously has a history. Indeed, she wrote her ground-breaking essay as a reaction to the currently popular conception of the historical devadasi as a corrupted woman performing a degraded art form, a conception that had been propagated, moreover, by the very circles that initiated the destruction of this profession in the late nineteenth century, the English-educated Hindu middle

and upper classes. It was this section of the population that had been most influenced by the Western perception of the devadasi as prostitute, which was doubtless the legacy of such writers and judges as Paes and Dubois.

In 1892 a group from these classes, which called itself the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association, launched the Anti-Nautch campaign, the purpose of which was to abolish all forms of professional dancing traditionally practised by women. (The word "nautch" is an anglicized version of a number of Indian vernacular terms derived from the Sanskrit root *nāc*, meaning dance.) These reformers had clearly been persuaded by the Western/Christian classification of dancing women as prostitutes, and were further responding to pressure from the British government in India, which had (in spite of its official policy of non-interference at the time) also denounced the dancers during a number of publicized court cases involving devadasis.¹⁹ Moreover, they were products of an increasingly powerful social and political community that was determined to eliminate from Indian and particularly Hindu society those practices which they believed were detrimental to India's development as a nation: many of these reformers were, not surprisingly, rationalists as well. It is significant that most of the customs they attacked – child marriage, polygamy, sati, the Hindu convention of disallowing widow remarriage, and the devadasi tradition – involved what they perceived as the mistreatment of women and girls. While there is no doubt that most of these customs constituted serious gender oppressions, their refusal to distinguish between the culture of the temple dancers and such horrendous acts as the marrying of prepubertal girls to grown men is, nevertheless, questionable. For what this tendency to lump together all manner of feminine activities and functions suggests is that the reformers were, consciously or unconsciously, passing their judgments from a stance that homogenized women. That stance was a staunchly androcentric one, and I would argue that the success of their efforts, at least in regard to the devadasis, was the result of the emergence of a new kind of patriarchy, which was becoming more and more prevalent in India as the nineteenth century drew to a close.

This new patriarchy, unlike the older variety alongside which it existed, not only narrowed the roles that women were permitted to play in society, valorizing their positions as wives and mothers, it also paved the way for the ascendancy of an urban middle-class prototype of woman. Coming as it did from the husbands and fathers of middle-class women who lived in cities, this growing ideology was interested in the feminine merely as it existed in relation to the masculine: its purpose was to produce wives and mothers who would be better companions for the young, English-educated men of the rising middle class. Women's alliances with one another, their relationships to god, their personal commitments to their physical, moral, spiritual and professional selves were relegated to the realm of the unimportant as the pri-

orities of the predominantly male, urban, middle-class social reformers began to hold sway. Thus, although the reformers insisted that they were dedicated to freeing women and girls from the cruel customs of the older and more established Hindu patriarchy, they had simply invented a new male-centred system into which women of all castes and traditions would be made to fit. In *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* Kumari Jayawardena arrives at a similar hypothesis: "Since all area of social reform concerned the family, the effect of the reforms may have been to increase conservatism and, far from liberating women, merely to make conditions within the family structure less deplorable, especially for women of the bourgeoisie."²⁰

The last thing I would want to do is to glorify the Hindu patriarchy that existed during the ages before the middle class rose to power in the nineteenth century. A belief structure that called for the burning of widows or their permanent withdrawal from the joys of life is hardly commendable. But this pre-modernization patriarchy did seem to acknowledge and tolerate a broader range of roles for women. Within it, some women flourished who were not wives or who chose to live outside the paternalism of conventional domestic arrangements, such as the wandering ascetic and poet Mirabai, the female bhakti saints, the girls and women from the nayar matrilineal caste of Kerala and, of course, the devadasi. One of the problems with any patriarchy is that the good fortune and freedom of some women is often predicated on the abuse of others.

The dilemma that the devadasis faced when confronted by the reformers and anti-Nautch campaigners was that they were not "women of the bourgeoisie". They did not share the middle-class belief in patrilineal descent nor its sexual mores nor even its conception of women as primarily keepers and managers of households. As I have already mentioned, the acts of dedication to the temple and marriage to god precluded the performing of domestic tasks. So extraordinary were the devadasis in terms of the construction of woman engendered by the reformers that they could not be made to conform to this paradigm without their distinctive ways of life being entirely destroyed. That the complete eradication of the devadasi culture was, in fact, the aim of the reformers is evident in a statement made by women's activist Muthulakshmi Reddy in 1927 when she first moved a bill in the Madras legislature to outlaw temple dedication. She said that she hoped that once they were released from their service to the temple, the devadasis "would become virtuous and legal wives, affectionate mothers and useful citizens".²¹ Her basic assumptions here demonstrate her allegiance to the middle-class doctrines of the anti-Nautch campaign. She suggests that, given devadasi practices, they could not possibly be "affectionate mothers and useful citizens" and, furthermore, that it is preferable to be a "legal" wife than to be a god's wife. In Reddy's estimation, "legal" wives have the monopoly on virtue.

Although the anti-Nautch campaign had seriously discredited the temple dancing women of South India, causing a public suppression of their culture decades before the Act actually became law in 1947, the passing of the "Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act" marked the end of the devadasi tradition. Disgraced and thrown out of the temples, the devadasis watched as the women from the high castes took over their dance on behalf of a newly independent Indian society that was eager to preserve its ancient artistic heritage.

When Narayan published *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* in 1961, the devadasis had been officially dispossessed for 14 years. Through the character of Rangi, the novel charts the effects of that dispossession. Narayan's devadasi is a woman on the very edges of Malgudi's Hindu society. Living "in the shadows of Abu Lane" (p. 81), Rangi is clearly from a family that has come down in the world, and she herself is the symbol of that decline. We are told by Nataraj, the narrator and protagonist, that her mother, Padma, was a dancer attached to Malgudi's Krishna temple: "Padma herself had been an exemplary, traditional dedicated woman of the temple, who could sing and dance, and who also took one or two wealthy lovers; she was now old and retired." Though there is some attempt to depict Padma as ruined in her old age, the narrator's tone is generally approving or neutral when he speaks of her. But her daughter, despite having inherited her mother's profession, is considered "notorious". Rangi's personal biography is filtered through the double mediation of Nataraj recounting details that he has learned from his employee, Sastri, who lives not in the "shadows" but in Abu Lane proper:

... she had studied in a school for a while, joined a drama troupe which toured the villages, and come back to the town after seducing all the menfolk she had set eyes on. According to Sastri, she was the worst woman who had ever come back to Malgudi. She was the subject of constant reference in Abu Lane, and was responsible for a great deal of the politics there. (p. 81)

The story of Rangi raises a number of uncertainties. First, we immediately suspect its veracity and the appropriateness of its implicit attitudes because it is so obviously exaggerated and is delivered to us by Rangi's greatest opponent, the ultra conservative Sastri. Second, the novel gives us no explanation for the difference between the town's denunciation of Rangi and its acceptance of Padma. Neither woman is married, both are or have been dancers associated with the temple, and both have taken more than one lover, and yet Rangi is unquestionably a pariah in a way that Padma is not. It is only when we have recourse to the history of the devadasis that this part of the story makes any sense.

Rangi is a product of the reformers' campaign to eradicate temple dancing in South India, which means that the ancient institutionalized protections of devadasi ways of life are no longer operating in Abu Lane. Having lost

the support of the Hindu society in general, Rangi has consequently become this middle-class neighbourhood's victim. Her practices are the subject of disparaging gossip and her life's experiences are mocked. As a fatherless woman who is not a wife or a mother and because she chooses to conduct her sexual life without the social sanction of marriage, Rangi is a marginalized figure in Malgudi, and it is this circumstance, created by a combination of history and intolerance, that makes her available to Vasu, the rakshasa whose lawlessness comprises the principal theme of the novel. But while Vasu is clearly an outsider, Rangi is not. Her status is liminal; she belongs to Malgudi, but only just. The result of this positioning is that, unlike Vasu, Rangi has a stake in the town's future and past. And this stake adds weight to her significance in the text. The novel is not able to shrug off the implications of this temple dancer's defiance and degradation as easily as it dismisses the threat that Vasu poses. Moreover, what we can tease out through an analysis of the representation of Rangi is a critique of Nataraj's middle-class community and its values.

The prevalence of marriage stories in the novel suggests that, for the people of Malgudi, wedlock is a state of much importance. Nataraj is constantly concerned with the condition of his marriage as one event after another leads him to fear for its survival, and Muthu, the mahout, and Vasu, all have some opinion on the subject. Even the poet's monosyllabic epic about Krishna and his milkmaid lover Radha ends with a wedding celebration, though this legend typically focuses on the god's passion for his human beloved to such an extent that marriage in the Krishna tales usually seems beside the point. (Some stories about Krishna assert that he never married Radha at all.) What the marriage stories have in common, other than the fact that they are all recounted by men, is that they construct marriage as a relationship involving the husband's dominance and the wife's submission.

Narayan does not, however, encourage the reader to believe that this is an acceptable situation, and the most potent criticism of marriage as it is practised in Malgudi comes from Rangi the devadasi. Although she never explicitly condemns marriage, her refusal to participate in it makes her a living illustration of an alternative model for women. We know that this is indeed a refusal, and not simply an inability because of her staunch defence of her "*dharma*" (which can be understood here as duty or prescribed course of life) when Nataraj, believing the gossip about dancing women, accuses her of taking opium: "Sir, I am only a public woman, following what is my *dharma*. I may be a sinner to you, but I do nothing worse than what some of the so-called family women are doing. I observe our rules. Whatever I do, I don't take opium." Rangi is certain that the manner in which she lives is entirely in accordance with the rules of her tradition and that these rules are perfectly legitimate. Moreover, the novel lets her justification stand.

Nataraj's conscience-stricken reaction to her indignation – "I felt apologetic or uttering so outrageous a remark" (p. 115) – seems to offer support to Rangi's convictions and, further, points to the possibility that there is or should be a place in Hindu community for a woman like her.

She has clearly, then, opted out of an institution that the middle class in the novel imposes on women unforgivingly and in doing so has escaped the oppressions inherent in being married in a androcentric society, though she has also incurred its disdain and suffered its punishment of marginalization. But there are rewards for rebellion: Rangi is independent in a way that the wives can never be. Not having to rely on men for shelter, protection, or emotional fulfilment, and having already received patriarchy's penalty for nonconformity, she is free from the stricture of such an insecurity-ridden passion as jealousy. When Vasu brings other women to his room, expecting her to "quarrel with them", Rangi simply dismisses his actions: "Let any man do what he fancies. I don't care what anyone does, so long as he doesn't dictate to me what I should do" (p. 116). If we contrast this reaction to infidelity with Nataraj's wife's fierce jealousy after Rangi visits them at their home, we come to realize how exceptional Narayan means to make his temple dancer. She is truly a woman of radical differences.

There is a pattern, then, in the novel's treatment of Rangi: it enshrines these differences at the same time that it gently chides Hindu society for its assumptions about unusual, overtly sexual women like her. Nowhere is this more humorously achieved than in the scene where the "notorious" temple dancer confronts the straitlaced printer in the back room of his print shop in the middle of the night. She has crept down from the attic room, where Vasu is sleeping, to persuade Nataraj to stop the gun-toting rakshasa from shooting Gumar the elephant. The reader watches as Nataraj, who is exhausted from working late on the first edition of the poet's epic and who has already experienced strong stirrings of arousal in Rangi's presence, is tossed between desire and resistance. In Nataraj's mind, Rangi becomes a female figure of immense power, a woman "ready as it seemed to swallow me up wholesale, to dissolve within the embrace of her mighty arms all the monogamous chastity I had practised a whole lifetime" (p. 115). Here is where we begin to understand that perhaps Rangi is more of a threat to Nataraj than Vasu is. For she jeopardizes both his status in the community, as Vasu does, and the stability of his domestic world. We are left with no doubt that his wife would somehow punish him were he to have sex with the temple dancer.

The encounter between a highly sexualized woman and a man determined to resist her has a long history in ancient Hindu literature. In the *Puranas* and the epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, time and again we see dangerously desirable women setting out to beguile men from their more significant pursuits. Surabhi D. Sheth describes the typical situation,

The picture one gets from the Puranic literature is of a man awaiting his fate as a prey of woman's physical charms and lacking any kind of inner control. At the same time, the image of woman which is projected is of a seductress trapping the man as if against his will.... It is probably for this reason that greater emphasis is placed on external controls in these stories as well as in codes of sexual behaviour.... Internalised controls were considered too difficult to cultivate given the kind of attitude the Puranic man betrayed towards woman's sexuality. Hence woman is blamed for *causing* sexual desire in man....²²

The "external controls" that the *Puranas* endorsed often involved the destruction or the victimization of the *femme fatale*. Rambha was turned to stone when she dared to tempt the sage Vishvamitra, and when the gods, Mitra and Varuna, lost some of their semen at the mere sight of Urvaishi, she was cursed to be born on earth. Sheth argues that the foundations for India's current patriarchy were laid in ancient Indian literature and that, therefore, the lives of women today in India are partially controlled by entrenched paradigms like the one quoted above. If this is the case, then Narayan is replicating in his novel an archetypal situation that has a very powerful hold on the minds of Hindu people. But this allusion in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* does not function merely as a signal to Indian readers that they are in the realm of myth and scripture. I would argue, in fact, that Narayan uses the paradigm in order to undermine it. And he does this by showing us that Nataraj's desire for Rangi does not have its source in the charms of the devadasi. Not once does Narayan suggest that Rangi is to blame for her admirer's attentions or lusty thoughts. On the contrary, he portrays her as absolutely indifferent to Nataraj's desire. Her only response to his sexual hysteria is "Are you going to save that elephant or not?" (p. 116) What the ancient authors missed about this repeated drama between various men and various sirens – that the problem was not women's sexuality but, in Sheth's words, "man's own obsession about his sexual autonomy"²³ – Narayan recovers through the character of Rangi.

In her connection to the displaced devadasis of India's history and in her disrupted connection to the fabled temptresses from the ancient epics and *Puranas*, Rangi brings a historicity to *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* that calls into question a prevailing view among critics concerning Narayan's apolitical bent.²⁴ It is true that a straining towards myth is evident in the manner in which Vasu, the modern-day rakshasa, is conveniently eliminated in the end, thereby freeing Nataraj and the town from having to come to terms with his anti-sociality, and that in his final treatment of Rangi, Narayan refuses to confront the political implications of his portrait of this temple dancer suffering from the vicissitudes of history. She is, when last we see her, an almost forgotten woman, who cringes in a corner during the police investigation

nto Vasu's death, looking "jaded in a dull sari, with unkempt hair" (p. 162). Earlier in the story, Rangi's perpetual state of "déshabillé" (p. 82) had elicited in Nataraj plenty of passion. Now it only contributes to the overall picture of her powerlessness and humiliation. The Bhasmasura myth is also rewritten on the novel's closing page and what is excised from it is any mention of woman's contribution to the annihilation of the demon. In its original rendering, Sastri acknowledges the cleverness and labour of the goddess Mohini (Vishnu in his seductive female form) in tricking Bhasmasura through a kind of "Simon says" game into touching his head with his world-destroying hand and thus destroying himself. The missing Mohini at the end of the novel corresponds to the degraded Rangi, and we can surmise from this that Narayan is not prepared to take his criticism of middle-class Malgudi to its farthest extreme: he colludes, finally, in that society's dismissal of the temple dancer.

Nevertheless his earlier criticism stands. Rangi, the devadasi who lives "in the shadows of Abu Lane", who takes men as lovers rather than husbands, who refuses to play the role of willing seductress assigned to her by the ancient literature of her country, remains a figure of difference in the novel. And while Narayan in the end sends her back to the edges of her society, he cannot get rid of her altogether.

As an indicator of historical change, Rangi can be compared to others among Narayan's women characters – Daisy, Savitri, Rosie, and Bharati, all of whom share with her a responsibility to their particular historical moments. Through Savitri, we learn about the anguish of wifedom in the 1930s, when women began to ask for something better than what conservative Hindu marriage could offer them; Bharati is the new Indian woman emerging from out of the last years of colonial rule and the imperatives of the nationalist movement; Rosie, another devadasi, demonstrates the reconstruction of the temple dance in the wake of Independence, its transformation into an art for public stages; in Daisy we see a woman responding to the effects of overpopulation; and Rangi, as this essay has argued, presents the consequences of the anti-Nautch campaign and the prevention of dedication act. They are made to bear on their persons and in their experiences the marks of Indian history. Narayan's fiction is not, therefore, as repressively timeless as critics tend to suggest. It is just a matter of looking for the political and the historical in the right places.

This examination of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* has attempted to recover the historical devadasi. But I must finally admit that she is not recoverable. I cannot make her speak to you, not with the texts of dance history and anthropology nor with Narayan's fiction, because although the devadasi did indeed exist and a number of them are still alive in India today, her presence is not reproducible in words. What you hear in these pages is not her but only me

sympathetic to her. In her excellent review article entitled "Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia", Rosalind O'Hanlon uncovers and questions one of the predominant myths at the heart of academic study – that the struggle of the intellectual to understand and write about the forgotten or neglected peoples of history is coterminous with the struggles of these same people to be heard by us:

We may wish in all faith for their freedom from marginality and deprivation, and do our best to cast our insights in a form which they will be able to use. But if we ask ourselves why it is that we attack historiography's dominant discourses, why we seek to find a resistant presence which has not been completely emptied or extinguished by the hegemonic, our answer must surely be that it is in order to envisage a realm of freedom in which we ourselves might speak.²⁵

This essay has served for me as that "realm of freedom".

NOTES

- 1 The All India Women's Conference endorsed the prohibition of devadasi dedication in 1930 after one of the Conference's more renowned members, Muthulakshmi Reddy, had introduced the bill into the Madras Legislature. See Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray, *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference 1927-1990*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1990, pp. 62-4.
- 2 Fakrul Alam, "Plot and Character in R.K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi: A Reassessment*", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 19:3, 1988, p. 88.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 91.
- 4 M.M. Mahood, *The Colonial Encounter: A Reading of Six Novels*, Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977.
- 5 U.P. Sinha, *Patterns of Myth and Reality: A Study in R.K. Narayan's Novels*, Delhi: Sandarbh, 1988.
- 6 R.K. Narayan, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, 1961, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983, p. 115. Subsequent references to page numbers will be to this edition of the novel.
- 7 Beryl De Zoete, *The Other Mind: A Study of Dance in South India*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1953, p. 190.
- 8 Frédérique Apffel Marglin, *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*, Delhi: Oxford UP, 1985, p. 3.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 4.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 5.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 4.
- 12 Reginald Massey and Rina Singha, *Indian Dances: Their History and Growth*, London: Faber, 1967, pp. 56-7.
- 13 De Zoete, p. 161.
- 14 Massey and Singha, pp. 58-9.
- 15 See A.K. Prasad, *Devadasi System in Ancient India: A Study of Temple Dancing Girls of South India*, Delhi: H.K. Publishers, 1991.

- 16 Ragini Devi, *Dances of India*, Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1962, p. 42. It is important to understand the devadasi in relation to her darker antithesis – the widow. In the more orthodox Hindu society that existed before Independence in August 1947, the Hindu widow was a figure of misfortune, impurity, and inauspiciousness (though in some circles she was held in a certain esteem – Mahatma Gandhi very much admired widows). The devadasi, however, was forever freed of the hardships of widowhood because she was married to god who, of course, cannot die. Such status in the firmly established Hindu patriarchy that existed in conjunction with the devadasi culture can hardly be overestimated.
- 17 Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: the Devadasi and her Dance", *The Economic and Political Weekly*, 20:44, 1985, p. 1870.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 1871.
- 19 One such case, reported in the English language newspaper the *Madura Mail* on January 13, 1894, involved a devadasi who was suing a temple in order to force its authorities to perform her dedication. The judge of the district court, a Mr. Dumergue, decided against her because, as the newspaper reported, "a dancing girl has no right to compel the Trustee of a Devasthanam [temple] by suit to allow her to be pottu-tied [dedicated through a wedding ceremony], on the ground that the ultimate object of the pottu-tying is to carry on prostitution and hence is immoral" (quoted in Marglin, p. 7). As an agent of the British government, the judge defined the devadasi as a prostitute entirely on the basis of her atypical sexual conduct, conduct that had, moreover, the sanction of the greater Hindu culture of which she was a part. That she was a professional woman, a dancer, a bearer of good luck for her community was entirely overlooked and rendered inconsequential by his decision.
- 20 Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, London: Zed Books, 1986, p. 80.
- 21 See Basu and Ray, p. 63.
- 22 Surabhi D. Sheth, "Women's Sexuality: A Portrayal from Ancient Indian Literature", *Manushi*, 71, 1992, p. 20.
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 20.
- 24 The focus of literary critics concerning this and virtually all of Narayan's fiction has typically been on the timeless quality the author creates through his use of myth, conventional Hindu attitudes of detachment, and his tendency to avoid overtly political subjects. See, e.g., Richard Cronin, "Quite Quiet India: The Despair of R.K. Narayan", *Encounter*, 64:3, 1985, p. 59.
- 25 Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia", *Modern Asian Studies*, 22:1, 1988, p. 219.