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Can the Muslim Speak? An Indebted Critique

A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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## REVIEW ESSAYS

CAN THE MUSLIM SPEAK?  
AN INDEBTED CRITIQUE

A CRITIQUE OF POSTCOLONIAL REASON: TOWARD A HISTORY OF THE VANISHING PRESENT. By Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. Pp. xii, 449.

There is a major difference between Spivak and Yossarian. Spivak embraces the catch-22, reveling in closing on a quarry that will always have just moved off: "The moving present—also a text written otherwise and elsewhere—does indeed become interminable fieldwork for the student of cultural politics" (157). This endlessly provisional chasing against deferment drives Spivak to her trademark contrivance of language—as she puts it, quoting from Lyotard, we are summoned by language "to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what [we] can presently phrase, and that [we] must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist" (295). The burden of response that this imposes on Spivak's reader can be as demanding as the representational burden that the elusiveness of the present imposes on her writing, which is not always successful. This is not to say that she is difficult, which is hardly worth repeating. Rather, on her own terms, if the writing had an assured outcome, it could only be dealing with a lesser problematic—as Jerry Garcia once mumbled, when you dive for oysters, you sometimes come up with clams.

There is, of course, nothing to prevent one from choosing to read Spivak on terms other than her own, as Terry Eagleton chose to do in *The London Review of Books*.<sup>1</sup> Eagleton's review consisted in a sustained complaint that he could not understand Spivak's book, as if this were a virtue rather than ground for declining the commission to review it. Claiming to understand the book completely would be almost as lazy, not only on the count of implausibility but because this too would be contrary to Spivak's own terms (it is no accident that the cover blurb should highlight Partha Chatterjee's reference to the book as "dazzling, exasperating, unfailingly powerful"). Beyond the sterile alternation of comprehension/incomprehension, we might seek a middle way, in something like Nagarjuna's sense, where "middle" means "beyond and unconditioned by" rather than "within and in between."<sup>2</sup> On this basis, rather than presuming either to dismiss or to contain Spivak's book, we might see where it can take—or, perhaps, send—us.

As the book's pugnaciously Kantian title indicates, there is nothing modest about its aspirations. In setting her postcolonial cat among the categorical

1. Terry Eagleton, "In the Gaudy Supermarket," *London Review of Books* 21 (May 13, 1999), 3-6.

2. See, for instance, C. Lindtner, *Nagarjuniana: Studies in the Writings and Philosophy of Nagarjuna (Indiske Studier, IV)* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1982).

pigeons of Western knowledge, Spivak darts among texts, structures, events, and lives across two centuries, four continents, and innumerable conjunctures. The outcome is a densely woven geopolitics of detail whose threads sporadically connect up like neurons in the brain (Spivak prefers textile metaphors). Thus we move back and forth between, say, Hindu law relating to the burning alive of widows and the credit-baiting of female outworkers under the current system of global financialization (266-311). This vertiginous swooping across the bounds of sense is intended to disturb the representational imperatives of Western discourse so as to snatch glimpses of that which Western discourse is structured not to represent. Principal among these exclusions, and Spivak's sovereign moving target, is the figure she terms the Native Informant.

The Native Informant suffers not only from voicelessness. She is also encumbered with a cast of surrogates, convenient impostors enscribed by anthropology and its representational affines. Spivak's primary methodological goal is to provide textual conditions under which the Native Informant can be heard, no matter how fleetingly. The achievement of these conditions is not simply a matter of scraping away the deposits of ethnographic ventriloquism, as if the Native Informant were somehow secreted beneath, waiting to be channeled. Rather, the critical role of a reformed Western pedagogy of the "Third World" will be "precisely not to undertake to restore a lost 'historical [native]' obliterated by the Hegelian chronotypograph and lurking in the generalized indigenous soul today . . . there is no *historically* available authentic [indigenous] point of view that can now step forth . . . and reclaim its rightful place in the narrative of world history" (65). Simply to invert Western discourse fails to disturb—and thereby relegitimizes—the polar opposition of colonizer and colonized that animated the colonial attitude in the first place. Cutting across this opposition, Spivak seeks out structural complicities between the dominant texts of the colonizing and the colonized cultures. Rather than clearing away the Eurocentric construction that Hegel imposed on the *Bhagavad Gita* as if this could recuperate an authentic indigenous residue, for instance, she registers structural commonalities between the two texts as "a gesture against some of the too-easy West-and-the-rest polarizations sometimes rampant in colonial and postcolonial discourse studies" (39).

While it is hard to see how a deconstruction of the genteel interchange between Hegel and the *Gita* might contribute to the Native Informant's audibility, the procedure is part of a wider and more complex strategy. At its simplest, this strategy preempts the tiresome refrain that there is something ironic about critics of European colonial discourse having to resort to European theory for tools with which to think beyond it. More significantly, Spivak's technique reconciles dominant texts within as well as between cultures, and it does so across time. Thus not only is there complicity between the master inscriptions of High Europe and Native Tradition, both safely distanced from the present. This complicity embraces the script of elite nationalism as well, cutting across the colonial binarism in the manner we have come to associate with the Subaltern Studies group. More uncomfortably—at least, for the assumed reader of this journal—

the self-congratulatory premises informing colonial and postcolonial discourse analysis in the contemporary Western academy are also implicated, as Spivak levels her gaze at “the implicit workings of the axiomatics of imperialism in the vocabulary of radical critique” (409).

Spivak’s (admittedly sympathetic) critique of academic radicalism confounds the mutually sustaining dualism of left and right, refusing the alibi for positionality that accrues from feeling good about feeling bad about being on the up-side of the international division of labor. Consistently—and with scrupulous regard to her own positionality—she insists that minority status in the first world is not equivalent to subaltern status in the third. The depth of the malaise that Spivak discerns in Western radicalism is apparent from the frequency with which she feels obliged to deplore the assimilation of Western women of color and postcolonial nationalist elites, Oxford-educated and all, to the condition of the credit-baited, bone-poor outworkers of the neocolonized third world.

This canny self-inclusion is not simply a political posture. Rather, the easy binarisms that conflate and essentialize relations of oppression are of a piece with the romanticized native stereotypes with which the radical Western academy glibly identifies. A problem with the ideal of solidarity is precisely that it *can* solidify, producing the familiar ahistorical essences (“woman,” “native,” “worker,” and so on) of the fundamentalist litany. Western academic radicalism generally fails to recognize that its solidarity/identification with an authentic indigene of its own imagining conflates two distinct senses of the English word “representation,” glossed by Spivak as “proxy” and “portrait” (258), that Marx, writing in German, automatically distinguished by means of the separate words *vertreten* and *darstellen*. Spivak’s point is not that the two should be separated. On the contrary, they inescapably entail each other. It is, rather, that life is not so easy that we can get away without recognizing their mutual entailment—the oppressed whom we represent (*vertreten*, as proxies) are necessarily artifacts of our representational practices (portraits, *darstellen*). This deconstructive recognition precludes political finalities and enjoins the genealogical interrogation of our representational practices, academic or otherwise. Hence the politics of positionality are organic to the epistemology of *différance*—the quest for the Native Informant, though politically and descriptively imperative, is (im)possible:

an ethnicity untroubled by the vicissitudes of history and neatly accessible as an object of investigation is a confection to which the disciplinary pieties of the anthropologist, the intellectual curiosity of the early colonials and the European scholars partly inspired by them, as well as the indigenous elite nationalists, by way of the culture of imperialism, contributed their labors, and the (proper) object (of investigation) is therefore “lost.” (60)

Spivak’s critique of scholarly radicalism cannot be said to afford comfort to the right. It is not so much that backlash conservatism is not a target for Spivak as that it is too easy a target.<sup>3</sup> Her pedagogical concern is with those of her natural allies who are insufficiently alert to the quicksilver complexities of the ever-

3. Thus her acknowledgments of it tend to be confined to footnotes, albeit extensive ones. See, for instance, note 82, 169–170.

vanishing present, a concern that repeatedly leads her into heresy concerning some of the motherhood statements of academic radicalism. More often than not, this heresy flows from a characteristic ambivalence that she terms the “critical intimacy” of affirmative deconstruction (425), which, in contrast to the reflex repudiations of oppositionalism, incorporates and acknowledges the appeal of that which is being criticized (the use to which Derrida puts Plato’s *pharmakon* is paradigmatic). Willed ambivalence is central to Spivak’s iconoclastic dialectic. Positively, this can be historicist and anti-utopian, as in her remark that turning one’s back on the trio of Kant, Hegel, and Marx “when so much of one’s critique is clearly if sometimes unwittingly copied from them, is to disavow agency, declare kingdom come by a denial of history” (9). Negatively, it sustains reproof of those who fail to recognize complicity, as in her pithy rebuttal of Fredric Jameson’s best-known article:<sup>4</sup> “Rather than prove that the subject has disappeared in postmodernism, the entire analysis hangs on the presence of a subject in a postmodernist hyperspace where it *feels* that old-fashioned thing: a loss of identity. The postmodern, as an inversion of the modern, repeats its discourse” (319-320).

Spivak’s discernment of structural complicities that span historical eras and divergent cultures has a heretical aspect so far as historicism is concerned. The continuities that the technique emphasizes are at odds with the discontinuity that unites historical particularists, whether traditional or postmodern. This is the point from which I would like to see where an engagement with Spivak’s text might lead. For the purpose, it is hard to resist the temptation to revisit her best-known Native Informant, the about-to-be incinerated widow of nineteenth-century Bengal, to consider the structural complicity between Spivak’s text and those of the colonial lawmakers and Brahmin pandits who conferred over the issue of *sati*. I shall argue that the three texts collude in prompting the question, Can the Muslim speak? As such, their complicity has historical continuity with the islamophobia that imperils the present. What follows is, therefore, an exercise in ambivalence, an indebted critique of (part of) Spivak’s book.

As (mis)translated into colonial discourse, the Sanskrit word *sati*—the feminine form of *sat*, whose meanings include approximations to the English words “truth” and “virtue”—became overwhelmed (Spivak might say invaginated) by one of its applications, coming to refer exclusively to the practice whereby, in certain regions of India, especially the more thoroughly colonized northeast, Hindu widows burned themselves, or were burned, on the funeral pyres of their husbands. Opposition to this practice made a mockery of the colonial divide, uniting Christian missionaries, British Anglicists, and a group of native reformers led by the Rajah Rammohun Roy against a correspondingly cross-colonial fellowship that brought native defenders of their cultural institutions together with a pragmatic group of British free-traders who contended that the moral issue was not worth the risk to the colonial interest that interference in native affairs

4. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 148 (July–August, 1984), 59-92.

would inescapably provoke.<sup>5</sup> It would be hard to invent a more perfect opportunity for Spivak than a single, well-defined controversy that so potently configured issues of concern for a Marxist-feminist critic of colonial discourse who combines a commitment to deconstructing colonial binarisms with a mother-tongue facility for much of the literature in question.

The difficulties that the topic posed for Spivak were profound. In particular, she had to negotiate a path between the Scylla of approving violence against women (not to mention the question of the agency of volunteers) and the Charybdis of endorsing a major ideological component of imperialist subject-production. Characteristically, she displaces the opposition. "Obviously," she signals the redundancy of her qualification, "I am not advocating the killing of widows" (296). When it finally came, in 1829, the British abolition of sati ("suttee," as they called it) was "admirable" (290). Rather than falling for a dilemma between gender and race, Spivak counterposes her deft one-liner on the imperial mission, "white men saving brown women from brown men," to the stock Brahmannical justification for the women's deaths: "They wanted to die," observing: "The two sentences go a long way to legitimize each other. One never encounters the testimony of the women's voice consciousness" (287). The shift of problematic from the "rights" and wrongs of viducide to the erasure of female subjecthood displaces attention away from the arid alternation between imperialist white men and patriarchal brown men ("a case of conflict . . . that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments"<sup>6</sup>) and onto the female subjectivity that the staging of this alternation obliterates, the outcome being the positive project of devising a countersentence to the original pair. Performing this displacement involves Spivak in macroetymology, as she sketches out the deeper genealogies of the two sentences. The colonizer's sentence (white men saving) becomes caught up in the epochal transition from mercantile to industrial capitalism (white men's savings?) with the result that its origin is "lost in the shuffle between other, more powerful discourses" (290). In an astute move, oddly reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss's account of totemism,<sup>7</sup> the Brahmin's sentence (the women wanted to die) is also encompassed within a larger frame, becoming a particular instance of the general shastric diminution of women. Since the *sati* controversy was restricted to the tip, it left the iceberg of women's subordination intact. This move has a dual outcome. On the one hand, it "loses" the Brahmin's sentence upwards in a manner homologous with the loss of the colonizer's sentence up into the narrative of world his-

5. Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Benoy Bhushan Roy, *Socioeconomic Impact of Sati in Bengal and the Role of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1987). More generally, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 117-148; David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); and Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

6. 294, quoting François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, transl. G. V. Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xi.

7. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, transl. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Books, 1963).

tory. On the other hand, assimilating *sati* to the general context of Hindu law's ideological devaluation of female subjectivity removes the awkward suggestion of voluntarism (implying consciousness) in the sentence "they wanted to die," diagnosing it as but one (admittedly excessive) instance of a pervasive "constructed counternarrative of woman's consciousness" (302). In the clash between these two sentences whose origins are thus lost, between "patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation," the figure of the woman disappears, "not into a pristine nothingness" but into a historical continuity that binds *sati* to the present, "a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development" (304).

The phrase "not into a pristine nothingness" is crucial. The place of the third-world woman's disappearance is positively marked, "with something other than silence and nonexistence, a violent aporia between subject and object status" (304).<sup>8</sup> Without this positive element, it would be hard to know where to start looking for pointers toward sublating this sorry foreclosure of women's consciousness into a counternarrative, let alone into the model of interventionist practice to which Spivak aspires. Given this element, however, she can dramatically change her mind on the subject, taking the opportunity afforded by the book to reverse her controversial declaration that the subaltern could not speak (though without thereby ruling cultural analysts out of employment, 308). So much for the theory. In practice, Spivak simply asserts that Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's postponement of her youth-suicide until the onset of menstruation constituted a form of speech (a denial of illicit love). Yet she admits that the middle-class nationalist Bhubaneswari was not a "true" subaltern. Moreover—and more to the point theoretically—Spivak does not explain the relationship between the theoretical apparatus that she has so carefully refined and her capacity to hear Bhubaneswari's announcement. Rather, her reading of the Bhubaneswari "example" evinces that most traditional of ethnographic stocks-in-trade, contextual empathy, one which, in this case, seems to reflect a shared alienation from a related family background.

I do not want to make too much of this objection. Spivak's account of the methodological problems presented by the effacement of subaltern consciousness is brilliant, and I for one cannot improve on her fallible solution to them.<sup>9</sup> My reason for making the point is that I want to separate the quest for audibility (the Bhubaneswari example) from the identification of the erasures effected by dominant narratives (the *sati* analysis). Spivak shows that the "white men saving brown women from brown men" formula distributes agency exclusively between

8. Shades of Nagarjuna again. For those in the know, the etymological correspondence between Spivak's text and the Sanskrit *na sat y asat* seems to me to be a productive irony.

9. For my own fallible forays into this territory, see, for instance, Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999); Wolfe, "Should the Subaltern Dream? 'Australian Aborigines' and the Problem of Ethnographic Ventriloquism," in *Cultures of Scholarship*, ed. Sally Humphreys (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 57-96.

the men involved, an erasure of female consciousness/will/agency that she finds reciprocated in the shastric texts to which colonizing discourse is conventionally counterposed. I have no quarrel with this contention, which I have found convincing since I first encountered it.<sup>10</sup> Rather than finding fault with Spivak's argument, I shall proceed, in a spirit of pharmacological indebtedness, to note an effacement that results from her own recapitulation of a colonizing (and, for that matter, communal) binarism. For the figures in her scheme of things (white men, brown men, brown women, good wives, Brahmin pandits, shastric sages, *et al.*) are all either Hindu or Christian—which is to say, they are all non-Muslim.

In common with Spivak, I would like to lift the issue of *sati* up into a wider framework, mine being the British suppression of Mughal power in India, a process that took place in a piecemeal but steady fashion over the period extending from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. To this end, I shall cite the example of the above-mentioned Rajah Rammohun Roy, the Hindu reformer who has been dubbed father of both modern India and the science of comparative religion, who by most accounts kick-started the Bengal Renaissance, and who collaborated with Christian missionaries and colonial administrators as a leader in the campaign to have *sati* banned by the colonial authorities. The campaign against *sati* was part and parcel of Rammohun's reforming activities, which also included the establishment of the first public Unitarian assembly in the world (the Brahmo Samaj); controversial translations of sacred texts into common tongues (including an idiosyncratically abridged version of the New Testament); the publication of newspapers and pamphlets in a range of languages which, even by Spivak's standards, is benumbing (for example, Bengali, Sanskrit, Urdu, Persian, Arabic, and English); the conduct of endless public polemics with Christian missionaries, Hindu conservatives, and others; and a campaign to reform Bengali law relating to women's property and inheritance (which was closely connected to the question of *sati*).<sup>11</sup> Throughout his public career, which is generally dated from his settling in Calcutta in 1815 to his death in England in 1833, Rammohun's program of reform was consistently dominated by two interlocking themes, a belief in monotheism and a commitment to social utility. The two were interlocked because Rammohun ascribed the causes of the social disharmony that he saw

10. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice," *Wedge* 7-8 (1985), 120-130.

11. The standard Christian hagiography of Rammohun remains useful (and used) for many of the details of his life, especially as supplemented by the 1962 editors' chapter-end notes. See Sophia Dobson Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. Dilip Kumar Biswas and Prabat Chandra Ganguli [1900] (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1962). From a large collection of sources of varying quality, see also Brajendranath Bannerji, "Rammohun Roy—The First Phase (From New and Unpublished Sources)," *Calcutta Review* (December 1933), 233-256; Bannerji, "Rammohun Roy (from New and Unpublished Sources)," *Calcutta Review* (January 1934), 60-72; *Selections from Official Letters and Documents Relating to the Life of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. R. P. Chanda and J. K. Majumdar (vol. 1, 1791-1830) (Calcutta: Oriental Book Agency, 1938); *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India*, ed. V. C. Joshi (Delhi: Vikas, 1975) (see in particular Rajat K. Ray's introduction, 1-20); *Rammohun Roy and the Last Moghuls—A Selection from Official Records (1803-1859)*, ed. J. K. Majumdar (Calcutta: Art Press, 1939); and Ajit Kumar Ray, *The Religious Ideas of Rammohun Roy* (New Delhi: Kanak, 1976).



around him to the machinations of clerics who fomented religious sectarianism by disguising from their followers the fact that all religions were expressions of belief in the same single God, albeit worshipped under different names and forms. To remedy the corruptions that clerics had imposed on the founding truth underlying all religions, Rammohun recommended the application of reason based on sensory experience.

Shades of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Hume, it might be said—indeed, has been said, since Rammohun's legacy has come to epitomize the nationalist anxiety that Partha Chatterjee has termed derivativeness.<sup>12</sup> The Rammohun legend is that of a phoenix, permeated with notions of awakening and renaissance. The central theme is that of return: Rammohun was a rescuer rather than a creator—the national community that he imagined had been interrupted. Awkwardly, however, this return is closely bound up with innovations imported by the colonizers. Rammohun's revitalizing activities, encapsulated in the anti-*sati* campaign, are credited to the influence of European scholars and missionaries. In particular, the researches of William Jones, Henry Colebrooke, and other European orientalists are held to have opened his eyes to a pristine form of Hinduism, hitherto obscured by ages of corrupt practice, which postulated a theology remarkably consonant with the monotheism and ethical precepts of the Christian West. As inaugurator of modern India, therefore, Rammohun pioneered the embarrassing irony that the emancipatory ideology with which Indian nationalism sought to mobilize an anticolonial movement was itself a colonial endowment.

European orientalists' celebration of Hinduism's buried glory not only flattered the Brahmannical elite. It also stigmatized the Mughal past. Between Golden Age and the present, there lay an intervening period of corruption and degeneracy which readily mapped onto the era of Muslim rule. Orientalism thus furnished a cyclical scheme whereby the arrival of Europeans in India promised a return to greatness which was simultaneously a redemption from the nadir plumbed under the Mughals. In this way, European orientalism and Indian nationalism colluded in endorsing the communalist principle that Muslim decline was synonymous with Hindu renaissance: "What was needed [for Indian nationalism] was to claim for the Indian nation the historical agency for completing the project of modernity. To make that claim, ancient India had to become the classical source of Indian modernity, while the 'Muslim period' would become the night of medieval darkness. Contributing to that description would be all the prejudices of the European enlightenment towards Islam."<sup>13</sup> Rammohun's anti-*sati* campaign was staged within the nexus between derivation anxiety in Hindu (proto-) nationalist discourse and the British suppression of Mughal power.

The European Enlightenment was not uniformly hostile to Islam, however. Since late-medieval times, a stream of Western scholars (including Ramon Lull, Roger Bacon, Leibniz, Voltaire, Gibbon, and Priestley) have devoted their ener-

12. Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

13. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 102.

gies, in a kind of reparation, to registering Europe's scientific, philosophical, and cultural debt to the Islamic or Arabic-speaking world.<sup>14</sup> This debt reaches deep into the origins of the European Renaissance, which relied to no small extent on Hellenistic sources that had been translated into Latin, not from original Greek texts that had lain forgotten in the libraries of Byzantium but from the living Arabic in which they continued to be vigorously expanded and debated in al-Andalus ("Muslim Spain"). The work of translation into Arabic having been effectively complete for centuries, most of the great Andalusian developers of the Hellen(ist)ic legacy (including Ibn Rushd [Averroes], Ibn Sinha [Avicenna], and Ibn Maymun [Maimonides]) took their Aristotle, their Galen, and their Neoplatonism from Arabic sources and did not even know Greek. The Greek only lived in the Arabic.<sup>15</sup> This was the world of learning which had become available for translation into the Latin of the western Empire as a result of conquest—more specifically, of the "*Reconquista*," the Christian *jihad* into al-Andalus through which an emergent Europe embarked on the Crusades.<sup>16</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, this legacy was also incorporated into the Mughal theater of Islamic civilization, where the young Rammohun, whose Brahmin father was a Mughal courtier, came to imbibe it as a central component of his polyglot education.

To cite but one example, Al-Shahrastani's *Kitab al-milal wa'l-nihal* was well known in late-eighteenth-century India.<sup>17</sup> A heresiograph, this book was devoted to the exposition and comparison of the doctrines of a wide range of religious and philosophical sects, including not only a number of Islamic schools but also, among others, Christianity and Judaism. The second part of the work discusses the chief philosophical schools of "paganism," the Sabæans, Greeks, and

14. Maxime Rodinson, "The Western Image and Western Studies of Islam" in *The Legacy of Islam*, ed. Joseph Schacht with C. E. Bosworth, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 9-62; Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, transl. R. Veinus (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987). For references from the nineteenth century on, see 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi, *La Transmission de la philosophie grecque au monde arabe* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1968), 181-187; J. W. Fück, "Islam as an Historical Problem in European Historiography since 1800" in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 304-314; Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 16-27; Francis E. Peters, *Aristoteles Arabus: The Oriental Translations and Commentaries on the Aristotelian Corpus* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 1-3; J.-J. Waardenburg, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'occident* (Paris: Mouton, 1963). In this general connection, readers of *History and Theory* may appreciate (re)reading Hayden White, "Ibn Khaldûn in World Philosophy of History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12 (1959-1960), 110-125.

15. Franz Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, transl. E. and J. Marmorstein (London: Routledge, 1992), 12. When, in the tenth century A.D., the Byzantine emperors Constantine VII and Romanus presented 'Abd ar-Rahman III with a Greek manuscript of Dioscorides' medicine, they failed to realize, as George Hourani put it, "that there was nobody in Andalusia who could read Ancient Greek"; Hourani, "The Early Growth of the Secular Sciences in Andalusia," *Studia Islamica* 32 (1970), 151. See also Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Spain: Unity in Diversity, 400-1000*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1995), 198-199.

16. Lucien Leclerc, *Histoire de la médecine Arabe: Exposé complet des traductions du grec; les sciences en Orient, leur transmission à l'Occident pour les traductions latines*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1876), II, 5. Compare Jean Jolivet, "The Arabic Inheritance" in *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy*, ed. Peter Dronke (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 114.

17. Ray, *Religious Ideas of Rammohun Roy*, 21.

Hindus.<sup>18</sup> From this Arabic source alone, Rammohun could have acquired a knowledge of Greek thought and gained familiarity with the recurrent objections and counter-objections presented to a wide range of religious systems in the course of theological polemics. In the same connection, one might also cite the redoubtable Shah Wali-Allah of Delhi, who published translations and critical exegeses of the works of many Islamic authorities and was particularly appreciative of the Sufi thought that would later influence Rammohun.<sup>19</sup> Like Rammohun, he was committed to social welfare and to belief in a unity beneath all religions.<sup>20</sup> Shah Wali-Allah also preceded Rammohun in inciting controversy by translating sacred texts from canonical languages into more popular idioms. He translated the *Qur'an* into Persian and his son, Shah Abdul-Aziz, translated it into Urdu.<sup>21</sup> Shah Abdul-Aziz had studied Hinduism, Christianity, and Judaism, from each of which he would quote, and is even alleged to have instructed a disciple that the words *Allah* and the Hindu *Parameshwar* were synonymous.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to this general background, there is the specific legacy of the theological discussions conducted at the sixteenth-century court of the Mughal emperor Akbar, which appear to have had direct input into Rammohun's thinking. The illiterate Akbar was consumed with religious interest, to the extent that he set aside a private audience hall, the *Diwan-i-Khas*, for the staging of religious debates.<sup>23</sup> Here Brahmins, Christians, Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews, and others would argue their cases before Akbar and his chief minister. Though he was a titular Muslim, Akbar's dalliance with eclectic and universal ideas came at least very close to heresy. He developed a universal faith of his own, the *Din-i-Ilahi*, to which an elect few of his courtiers subscribed, and which was held out as nominally conforming to Islam. Akbar composed an *Ilahi* prayer which expressed belief in a monotheistic ground beneath all religions. It reads like pure Rammohun:

O God, in every temple I see people seek Thee and in every language I hear spoken, people praise Thee. Polytheism and Islam feel after Thee. Each religion says, Thou art one without equal. If it be a mosque, people murmur the holy prayer, if it be a Christian church, people ring bells from love to Thee. Sometimes I frequent the Christian cloister and sometimes the mosque, but it is Thou whom I seek from temple to temple.<sup>24</sup>

18. Francis E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs: The Aristotelian Tradition in Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 285-286.

19. Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1980), II, 261-277.

20. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, "Renaissance in Indo-Pakistan: Shah Wali Allah Dihlawi," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy: With Short Accounts of Other Disciplines and the Modern Renaissance in Muslim Lands*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1963-1966), II, 1578.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Shah 'Abdu'l-'Aziz, *Malfuzat*, 44-45, cited in K. A. Nizami, "Socio-Religious Movements in Indian Islam (1763-1898)" in *India and Contemporary Islam: Proceedings of a Seminar*; (Transactions of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, VI), ed. S. T. Lokhandwalla (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1971), 102.

23. Abdul Majid Khan, "Islam and Other Religions and Cultures," in Lokhandwalla, *India and Contemporary Islam*, 97.

24. Quoted in *ibid.*

An outcome of the debates at Akbar's court was the Persian *Dabistan Mazahib* (conference of religions) which was well known among Islamic scholars in eighteenth-century Calcutta. Maulavi Nazr Ashraf of the *Sadr Diwani Adalat*, whom Rammohun would have known, edited the first printed edition of the *Dabistan*.<sup>25</sup> Francis Gladwyn had translated the first chapter into English in 1789.<sup>26</sup> The rest of the work was not translated into English until 1843, ten years after Rammohun's death (Anthony Troyer, one of the translators of the 1843 edition, had known him personally<sup>27</sup>). The *Dabistan* is devoted to comparative discussions of religions, including Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and others. So far as Rammohun is concerned, the most striking section occurs towards the end of the work—in the third volume—where Akbar's *Ilahi* is represented by a philosopher who engages in disputation with, among others, a Muslim, a Christian, and a Brahmin. The *Dabistan*'s philosopher thus took on adversaries almost identical to those whom Rammohun was later to engage.

Rammohun embodies the linkage between this Indian Islamic inheritance and the *sati* controversy. The more general point concerns the construction of Indian nationalism's derivation anxiety. Given the currency in India of an indigenous reformulation of the Hellenistic legacy to which the colonial propagandists of the European enlightenment laid exclusive claim, there were Indians for whom the central tenets of the European Enlightenment will not have been news. A focus on these Indians would have precluded the reproach of derivativeness. In other words, Indian nationalism's derivation anxiety requires the effacement of the legacy of Indian Islam as a condition of its possibility. In this effacement, Indian nationalism corroborated a European tradition of considerable cultural depth. As far back as the eleventh century of the Christian era, for instance, the Andalusian Ibn 'Abdun had warned his fellow Muslims about the activities of the translators: "Do not sell scientific books to Jews or Christians . . . since they translate these scientific books, attributing them to their own people and bishops when they are actually Muslim works."<sup>28</sup>

Rammohun's steeping in the Indian Islamic inheritance is abundantly evident from a rationalist pamphlet, the *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin*<sup>29</sup> (Offering to Monotheists) that he published in Persian and Arabic in 1804, some years before he was to learn English and over a decade before he was to settle in Calcutta to his Anglophone career of reform. In the *Tuhfat*, Rammohun cites Arabic authorities to the point of overkill in order to promote the rationalist linkage of monotheism and social utility that would dominate his later publications:

25. Ray, *Religious Ideas of Rammohun Roy*, 22.

26. *Ibid.*

27. "Preliminary Discourse" in *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, transl. David Shea and Anthony Troyer, 3 vols. (Paris: Oriental Translation Fund, 1843), I, 118.

28. *Séville Mussulman au début du XIIe siècle: Le traité d'Ibn 'Abdun sur la vie urbaine et les corps de métiers*, ed., comment., and transl. Evariste Lévi-Provençal (Paris: Librairie Orientale et Américaine, 1947), 128, § 206.

29. Rammohun Roy, *Tuhfat u'l Muwahhiddin*, transl. O. E. Obaide, reproduced as appendix (24 pp.) in K. C. Mitter and Rammohun Roy, *Rammohun Roy and Tuhfatul Muwahhiddin* [sic] (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1975).

[M]ost of the leaders of different religions, for the sake of perpetuating their names and gaining honor, having invented several dogmas of faith, have declared them in the form of truth by pretending some supernatural act or by the force of their tongue . . . and thereby have made a number of people adhere to them, so that those poor people having lost sight of conscience bind themselves to submit to their leaders. . . . Having a regard for their religion and faith, they think such abominable acts as murder, usurpation and torturing others, although they be of the same species and offspring of the same parents, acts of great virtue.<sup>30</sup>

To cut a long concordance short,<sup>31</sup> there is no rupture: the reformist principles that have been attributed to European influence were already enunciated in an Indian idiom before Rammohun had learned English.<sup>32</sup> As a reading of his (relatively slender) corpus reveals, the basic components of his post-1815 ideology, to which the anti-*sati* campaign was central, are recognizably expressed in the *Tuhfat*.<sup>33</sup> True, the *Tuhfat* does not mention *sati* by name, but it was addressed to a Muslim audience, whose most troubling propensity from Rammohun's point of view was not burning widows alive but murdering idolatrous Brahmins. His subsequent arguments against *sati* did not exceed the *Tuhfat*'s propositional repertoire. They merely applied it to a different particular. If anything, the *Tuhfat*'s failure to mention *sati* further discounts the likelihood of European models having had any significant influence on the formation of his ideology. As to why *sati* should have acquired such specific salience within his overall reform agenda, there seems no reason to discount the impact of witnessing his sister-in-law being burned alive with his brother's body in 1812.<sup>34</sup> This is not to suggest that colonialism failed to make *sati* an issue, in much the same way as it made issues of, say, caste or diet. But making something an issue is not the same as supplying the script of what can be said about it. That takes time. The example of the *Tuhfat* shows that responses to the issues that colonialism raised could still be framed in indigenous idioms; that, in Rammohun's lifetime, the historical self-fashioning of an indigenous elite was not yet complete.

Rammohun is not, of course, significant in himself, but as a hook into the global narrative of Muslim effacement in which Hindu nationalism and British colonialism were mutually complicit.<sup>35</sup> At this wider level, not only is it obvious that

30. Roy, *Tuhfat*, 4.

31. I discuss the *Tuhfat*'s foreshadowing of Rammohun's later publications in more detail in an article that is currently being considered by the editors of *Postcolonial Studies*.

32. "His [Rammohun's] argument against *sati* was thus of a piece with his critique of image worship and advocacy of monotheism"; Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, 54.

33. In addition to the *Tuhfat*, see *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. Kalidas Nag and Debajyoti Burman, 6 vols. (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1945–1951). Rammohun translated most of his Bengali writings into English and vice versa (compare *Rammohan Rachanabali*, ed. Ajitkumar Ghosh [Calcutta: Haraf Prakashani, 1973]), major exceptions being his lengthy technical discussions of Bengali Hindu *dayabhaga* law relating to women's inheritance rights and his devotional songs. See *Rammohun Roy—The Complete Songs*, transl. N. Guha (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1973).

34. I cannot trace the widow's name, which seems—consistently enough—to have perished with her.

35. The point shares ground with Spivak's observation that "to confine the construction of *Sati* to colonial negotiations, and finally to the Ram Mohun Roy—Lord William Bentinck exchange, is also to avoid the question of 'subaltern consciousness'" (289, n. 137).

the anti-*sati* campaign was continuous with the principles enunciated in the *Tuhfat*, but Indian Islam in general was noted for its opposition to *sati*. Indeed, though Spivak's closely woven text leaves few ways through, in this connection Indian Islam manages to interpolate a countersentential trace. Spivak quotes Edward Thompson—but without noting the significance of his reference to the Mughals—in an imperialist text that she otherwise justly criticizes:

It may seem unjust and illogical that the Moguls, who freely impaled and flayed alive, or nationals of Europe, whose countries had such ferocious penal codes and had known, scarcely a century before suttee began to shock the English conscience, orgies of witch-burning and religious persecution, should have felt as they did about suttee (296).<sup>36</sup>

Spivak's surprising complicity in an exclusion that joins Hindu nationalism to British colonialism would seem to flow from her reliance on questionable secondary sources. Despite bringing careful discrimination to her reading of some of the Sanskrit texts that figured most prominently in the *sati* controversy, when it comes to the history of nineteenth-century Bengal she relies much less critically on the account provided by Lata Mani, who in turn relied on Spivak and her fellow-Hindu Sumit Sarkar.<sup>37</sup> Sarkar had read the *Tuhfat* to evaluate its significance for Rammohun's later career but ignored its repeated Islamic citations. This enabled him to claim that there was a break between the *Tuhfat*'s "militant rationalism" and a conservatism that he ascribed to Rammohun's later ideology. This break, "a certain retreat," applied both socially and intellectually: "On the conceptual level, the claims of reason are now [post-1815] balanced and increasingly limited by Upanishadic [Hindu scriptural] authority as well as by a conservative use of the social comfort criterion."<sup>38</sup> Symptomatic of this retreat was the development, in "sharp contrast" to the *Tuhfat*, of an eclecticism on Rammohun's part which led members of different religions to claim him as their own. Yet it is clear that this "eclecticism" is simply the universalism whereby Rammohun divined monotheism at the heart of all religions, a perspective which was as central to the *Tuhfat* as it was to be to his later works. Moreover, the social retreat that Sarkar alleges is circumstantial rather than conceptual, consisting mainly of evidence that members of the Brahmo Samaj organization did not give up caste observances (for instance, Rammohun continued to wear his sacred thread and took a Brahmin cook with him when he went to England<sup>39</sup>). Yet Sarkar does not

36. Quoting from Edward John Thompson, *Suttee: A Historical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow-Burning* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928), 132.

37. As readers of her aptly conceived *Contentious Traditions* will be aware, Mani was cruelly prevented from completing her research. Her earlier articles, on which Spivak, writing before 1999, relied, are: Mani, "The Production of an Official Discourse on *Sati* in Early Nineteenth-Century Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 21 (April 26, 1986) ("Review of Women's Studies" supplement), 32-40; Mani, "'Contentious Traditions': The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India" in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 88-126. For completeness, see also Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *SATI* in Colonial India," *Cultural Critique* (Fall 1987), 119-156.

38. Sumit Sarkar, "Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past," in Joshi, *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization*, 46-68.

39. *Ibid.*, 53.

even suggest (let alone produce evidence to show) that the allegedly more radical author of the *Tuhfat* had transgressed caste regulations to any greater extent. Apart from the Upanishadic citations, therefore, the differences that constitute Sarkar's alleged break do not stand up to scrutiny. But the reason why Rammohun should not have cited the Hindu Upanishads in the *Tuhfat* is too obvious to state. The issue is not what he was citing but whether he was citing at all. The *Tuhfat* not only relies throughout on quotations from the *Qur'an* and Hafiz but repetitively authorizes itself by means of technical terms from Arabic logic.

Following Sarkar, Mani also contended that there was a discursive shift between the *Tuhfat* and Rammohun's later writings. In the articles that Spivak cites, Mani argued cogently that the material issue of *sati* provided the ground for a contest over scriptural authority involving British officials and various Brahmannical factions, asserting that a particular construction of ancient tradition was constitutive of India's emergent modernity.<sup>40</sup> In allegedly moving from the bare rationalism of the *Tuhfat* to his later penchant for scriptural citation, Rammohun was shifting into this modernizing mode. His engagement with *sati* was a symptom of this shift. Unfortunately, however, rather than evidencing any personal engagement with the *Tuhfat* (which does not appear in her footnotes), Mani simply invokes Sarkar's interpretation of it,<sup>41</sup> with the result that her account becomes susceptible to the same objections as his.

This is not to deny that the *sati* controversy provided the pretext for a discursive contest, involving certain brown and white men, which suppressed the empirical consciousnesses of certain brown women. Nor is it to detract from the historical purchase of the "white men saving brown women from brown men" sentence, which, as the crocodile tears that fell with the bombs on the women of Afghanistan attest, captures a feature of transnational domination that continues into the present. The point is rather that, just as the "we" in humanism universalizes Europe, so does the white men/brown men formula Hinduize brownness in the context of the *sati* controversy. In excluding Islam from the category of a universal subjecthood, Spivak's text recapitulates one of the elementary structures of European subject-formation. In regard to this particular structural complicity, no-one is more enlightening than Spivak herself.

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40. A similar argument had earlier been put by Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, "Barristers and Brahmins in India: Legal Cultures and Social Change," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 8 (1965), 24-49; Rudolph and Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

41. "Sarkar has discussed how Rammohun Roy moves from arguments based on reason in *Tuhfat* to arguments that are increasingly reliant on brahmanic scripture. I suggest that this trajectory of Rammohun might be understood as mapping the discursive shift that accompanies colonial rule" (Mani, "Contentious Traditions," in Sangari and Vaid, *Recasting Women*, 91).