Sydney Owenson’s prodigious career reflects her preoccupation with issues of identity and performativity, topics that dominated her literary and political agendas. Best known for her 1806 novel *The Wild Irish Girl*, Owenson famously adopted the public persona of her eponymous heroine and performed the role of the Irish princess for literary and social circles in London and Dublin.⁠¹ Owenson learned her love of Ireland and the art of performance from her father, an Irish actor and theater manager who was committed to establishing a National Theater in Ireland.⁠² Owenson’s many Irish novels attest to her own commitment to Irish independence and Catholic emancipation, but she also wrote controversially about France, Greece, Italy and India. Her writings are populated with zealous protagonists – particularly women – who are profoundly devoted to the preservation of their religious or national identities. Her 1811 novel *The Missionary: An Indian Tale*, for example, introduces a heroine whose performance of sati disrupts colonial and missionary power. Examining the Hindu woman’s vexed status as a repository of culture, *The Missionary* explores the ritual space of sati as the gendered site for the articulation of cultural resistance.⁠³

Set primarily in seventeenth-century Kashmir and Spanish-controlled Portugese Goa, *The Missionary* covers a twenty year time span, concluding roughly four years after Portugal’s successful revolution against Spain.
The Portugese priest Hilarion D’Acugna, travels to India to pursue the missionary project where he contrives to convert the much-admired Luxima, Brachmachira of Kashmir. The ill-fated religious leaders fall in love, struggling with the conflict between their religious obligations and their passion. Once discovered, Luxima loses caste, and the Dominican authorities of the Inquisition indict Hilarion for heresy and for the seduction of a neophyte, sentencing him to immediate death by fire. When Luxima (who has just escaped a nunnery) jumps upon Hilarion’s funeral pyre, she incites a long-imminent Hindu uprising against colonial rule. Underscoring women’s troubling role in the transmission of Hindu culture, Luxima’s aborted ritual provokes the centuries-long debate about sati and female agency.

Nineteenth-century conversations about sati considered in part the distinction between voluntary and forced sati, an issue that Lati Mani suggests helped shape colonial discourse and policy. These same debates have reerupted in a fairly recent spate of critical commentary, much of which responds to Gayatri Spivak’s now proverbial question, “Does the Subaltern Speak?” Indeed, many critics have found it difficult to assert the will of the sati, because her voice, if heard at all, is silenced by a painful and fiery death. Moreover, as Spivak suggests, speaking for – even in defense of – the widow introduces a whole new set of theoretical problems. Paul Courtright rightly identifies in many representations of sati “a profound and irreducible cultural ambivalence, shared by Hindus and Westerners alike, whether traditional, colonial or modern in mentality” (48). Unsurprisingly, British novels about India often reiterate this ambivalence, invoking the complexities of most analyses of the ritual.

The practice (or compulsion) of self-immolation indeed raises complicated questions about the Hindu woman’s social and cultural status. When a woman commits sati, she is believed to become a symbol of power to her family and her community, and the generative (though potentially destructive) strength of her sat (virtue) is thought to be self-emanating and forceful. Sati in fact means “good woman” or “truthful woman,” and has come to refer to the practice as well as the woman. As John Hawley and Donna Wulff explain, the decision to commit sati results from the energy or possession of her sat:

As she moves forward to the act of self-sacrifice that demonstrates outwardly what she inwardly already is – a woman of pure virtue and truth – she is believed to radiate the nurturant beliefs of motherhood upon her family, her community, and those who come to worship her. This power is felt to persist after death, as well. Hence … she wields that powerful combination of the virginal and the motherly.
The ideal sati is – like Luxima – at once bride, widow and virgin, reenacting a timeless (though regionally varying) ritual that blesses her family and husband even after her death.\textsuperscript{11} Performing a ceremony that blends together the two rites of passage – wedding and funeral – the sati dresses as a bride, carefully adorning herself in jewelry and red clothing with the help of other women who sing and chant as the preparations (sringar) are made. In so doing, she prepares to be eternally united with her husband.\textsuperscript{12} As bride/widow, virgin/mother, woman/goddess, the sati exceeds her status as merely a devoted wife, becoming a powerful and revered embodiment of perfection.

Hindu mythology views sati as an important link between the earthly and the spiritual worlds. Often associated with the Great Goddess, the sati shores up a plurality of forms into a unitariness that both incorporates and transcends the earthly world.\textsuperscript{13} For others, she evokes the goddess Sati who avenged her father’s insult to her husband by sacrificing herself in a self-emanating fire.\textsuperscript{14} Sati is also associated with the goddesses known as satimata or “sati mothers”: real women who immolated themselves and who are venerated at various sacred spots; these women are simultaneously real women and goddesses.\textsuperscript{15} Finally, as Harlan explains, satis are said to transform into supernatural beings akin to goddesses who can be at once good and “powerfully destructive.”\textsuperscript{16} Because the sati is believed to possess the power to both bless and curse her family and community at the moment of her death, she inspires fear and respect. The sati story, Harlan writes, “resists attempts to keep goodness and real power – namely uncontrolled and unhandled power – separate.”\textsuperscript{17} Harlan’s study emphasizes the subjectivity of the sati in making and articulating the choice, directing the ritual, and achieving the cultural power of the practice. Moreover, the assertion of intention to become a sati is an important part of the process. In other words, as Harlan puts it, “this seemingly brief moment of female power undermines women’s subordinate role in the gender hierarchy.”\textsuperscript{18} With her utterance of intention, blessing or curse, the sati garners cultural and religious power.

There were of course many other (and more self-serving) justifications for sati.\textsuperscript{19} Supporters of the practice, for example, justified it as a means of guarding the widows’ virtue: “the ultimate chastity belt,” as Sakuntala Narsimhan puts it.\textsuperscript{20} In addition, widow-burning reduced what little economic control women held in Hindu society because it insured that the widow’s inheritance remained in the husband’s family rather than at her disposal. Even those who advocated the abolition of sati such as Rammohun Roy worried about the potential surplus of needy, lusty widows: “If there was no concremation, widows may go astray; if they burn, this fear is removed.”\textsuperscript{21}
On the other hand, Hindu scripture seems to promote ascetic widowhood rather than sati. An 1817 vyawastha (pundit report) stated that scriptural sanction was ambiguous and officials consequently negotiated the ambiguity by policing the practice, making a crucial distinction between illegal or legal sati.

Nineteenth-century Europeans predictably responded to the practice of sati with expressions of shock and horror; however the civilizing and missionary project were not on quite the same page. While the missionaries unilaterally opposed sati, the East India Company was hesitant to interfere in the practice of sati, and it relied upon the scriptural interpretations of Brahmins and pundits to support its views. Consequently, the EIC regulated the practice, forbidding methods of coercion such as drugging or binding the widow, and it was illegal for a woman under 16, pregnant, or with an infant to commit sati. Sati had to be the voluntary decision of an unhindered lucid adult in order to be legal.

European representations of the ritual reiterate the binary of forced versus voluntary sati, depicting either the violent coercion of the widow or, conversely, a beautiful young woman’s brave but submissive ascension to the pyre. As Andrea Major has suggested, shifting interpretations of the custom reflect the concerns of the metropole’s own society, recognising cultural similarities rather than differences. Westerners like Owenson received information about sati from mediated eye-witness accounts in official reports, missionary propaganda, and travelogues, all of which reflect the discursive ambivalence attending the practice. Owenson’s novel engages and challenges these representations of India generated by the metropole and its agents.

Owenson wrote The Missionary when the issue of EIC control and cultural intervention in India was highly contested. In 1813, the year missionary activity was legalized in India, the EIC’s monopoly of the Indian trade was abolished. Although Owenson’s text only addresses contemporary issues in India once (see below), her paratextual material creates a narrative framework that makes clear her engagement with the issue of the colonial project within Europe as well as in India. The Missionary includes a number of footnotes that employ a variety of scholarly sources, mostly travel accounts from the seventeenth-century. John Drew identifies Owenson’s “total immersion” in the work of Jones as well as her reliance upon Francois Bernier (the first European to visit Kashmir) for her setting, suggesting that she collected her Indian material from Charles Ormsby’s Oriental Library which “supplied her with rare books that gave the sanction of authority to her own wild and improbable visions.” That Owenson may have felt she needed “sanction” suggests that she understood that she was expressing
ideas for which she might be censured. Julia Wright observes that Owenson’s version of India is “de(anglo)centered”: of seventeen sources on Indian history and culture, eleven were originally written in languages other than English, including Bernier’s travelogues, Colebrooke’s and Jones’ translations of legal texts, and Dow’s translation of Persian history. Owenson’s patchwork of sources imbues her novel with an excess of meanings that provides the reader with an understanding of India that is as intentionally un-British as it is un-definitive. This multiplicity of interpretative and representative possibilities permits the novel to critique England’s missionary and civilizing projects while seeming to address a different time and place.

Although Owenson’s novel addresses seventeenth-century India and Portugal, a footnote about the Vellore Mutiny of 1806 alludes to contemporary British religious and civil domination of India. The reference to this incident invokes the EIC’s concern that Indians would respond with hostility to missionary activity:

An insurrection of a fatal consequence took place in Vellore so late as 1806, and a mutiny at Nundydrag and Benglore occurred about the same period: both were supposed to have originated in the religious bigotry of the natives, suddenly kindled by the supposed threatened violence of their faith from the Christian settlers. (241)

The much-debated Vellore incident occurred when Indian sepoys (soldiers in the British army) killed hundreds of British soldiers in response to regulations that required them to wear uniform headgear, shave their beards, and remove caste marks. Although initially the incident was attributed to Muslim intrigue, Bentinck’s 1806 “Report of the Commission” determined that the Sepoys revolted against the new military dress out of concern for their cultural identity and caste status: “The Sepoys appear to have felt, that the wearing of the new Tarband [sic] would make them come to be considered as Europeans, and would have removed them from society and intercourse of their own Casts.” The Vellore Mutiny signalled an important moment in the history of the British presence in India, shifting away from the policy of nonintervention and toward assimilation. The subsequent debate sparked a pamphlet war of more than twenty-five authors and later the Quarterly and the Edinburgh Review joined the conversation. Siraj Ahmed writes that this pamphlet debate was “one more example of the discursive conflict between the principles of the civilizing mission and the politics of empire.” An avid reader of and respondent to the periodicals, Owenson most certainly would have witnessed these debates.

Owenson’s footnote about the Vellore incident calls attention to the
very real threat of rebellion against cultural repression, a reality reinforced by the revolutionary energies witnessed in Europe and its colonies in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century. Overtly linking British colonial rule in India to Spanish domination of Portugal and its colonies in seventeenth-century Goa, *The Missionary* identifies a similar pattern of cultural repression and insurgence. The narrator explains that Spanish control of Portugal and its colonies was declining, and “it was known by many fatal symptoms that the Indians were “ripe for insurrection”:

> The arts used by the Dominicans and the Jesuits for the conversion of the followers of Brahma, the evil consequences which had arisen by the forfeiture of cast ... with the coercive tyranny of the Spanish government, had excited in the breasts of the mild, patient, and long-enduring Hindus, a principle of resistance, which waited only for some strong and sudden impulse to call it into action. (241)

Frustrated with the tyranny of Spanish religious and secular oppression, then, the Hindus rebelled, provoked by the figure of Luxima on Hilarion’s pile:

> A sudden impulse was given to feelings long suppressed:—the timid spirits of the Hindoos rallied to an event which touched their hearts, and roused them from their lethargy of despair;——the sufferings, the oppression they had so long endured seemed epitomized before their eyes in the person of their celebrated and distinguished Prophetess. (250)

The Hindus, like the Portuguese, suffered at the injustice of Spanish colonial rule and the iniquity of the Inquisition.

Owenson explicitly links the Vellore footnote to the brutality of the Inquisition by its proximity in theme and position to the preceding footnote. Both footnotes evoke the fear and paranoia swirling around a society that rules with religious bigotry and tyranny. The second note, from the anti-Catholic Stockdale’s *History of the Inquisition*, explains the secrecy with which the Inquisitional proceedings are conducted and the repression of those over whom it flaunts its power: “If by accident the slightest word should escape one, which concerned it ever so little, it would be necessary immediately to accuse and inform against one’s self” (241). In fact, a compatriot and Jesuit informed against Hilarion, demonstrating the divisiveness within one’s own national community and among the different orders of the Catholic Church. *The Missionary* thus censures the religious fanaticism of the Catholic Church and its behavior towards both Christians and Hindus.
Hilarion’s ordeal before the Dominican tribunal echoes Luxima’s trial before her own community elders, and both have been turned in by watchful and malevolent supporters of their respective religious elites. Two Brahmins report Luxima to the authorities, and her Grandfather performs the rites of excommunication, suggesting that even family bonds weaken under the yoke of religious persecution. The Guru reads aloud from the laws of Menu, sentencing Luxima to the life of a Chancalas (outcast and wanderer), quoting also the law that sentences to death by fire the man who seduces a guarded, eminent Priestess. Although Hilarion is mysteriously spared his gruesome death during Luxima’s ceremony, he is later served the same sentence by the Dominicans for essentially the same offense. The ceremony of Brahminical excommunication in *The Missionary* closely resembles the *auto-de-fè*; both involve solemn processions, the display of religious symbols and – importantly – fire, the purifying element. The narrator explicitly draws this parallel when describing the night of the *auto-da-fè*:

> It was on such an evening as this, that the Indian Priestess witnessed the dreadful act of her excommunication; the heavens smiled then, as now; and man, the minister of error, was then, as now, cruel and unjust,—substituting malevolence for mercy, and the horrors of a fanatical superstition for the blessed peace and loving kindness of true religion” (247).

Owenson’s novel here exposes the mercilessness of patriarchal religion, enforcing rituals that compel its members to endure humiliation, exile or death. Owenson’s representation of this male ritual space, enforced by the elders of the communities, conflates Catholic and Hindu practices. As Ahmed comments, “in the shared element of fire, the irrationality of the Inquisition and Roman Catholicism blurs into the irrationality of sati and Brahminical Hinduism”. Where Hindu and Catholic “irrationality” diverge, however, is on the issue of proselytization.

Hilarion’s attempt to convert Luxima – though couched in the vocabulary of romance – reveals the gendered violence of the missionary project. When she is stripped of her caste and title, shunned by her family and excommunicated, Hilarion takes advantage of her vulnerable state and baptizes her. The ritual sacrament signals for Hilarion her rebirth as a Christian, but for Luxima it marks her entrance into her new life with her lover. When Hilarion asks her to take up the cross and follow him to Goa, she replies, “Follow thee! O Heaven! *Through life to death*” (191). Here the ritual of baptism is merged with the ritual of sati; Luxima transforms the baptismal rite into her intention of becoming a sati who follows her mate “through life
to death.” However, Luxima commits herself to Hilarion rather than to his Christian God.

Although Luxima goes through the motions of conversion, she never relinquishes her commitment to Brahma, a fact of which Hilarion is cognizant. He blames his failure, however, upon the religious “prejudices” of the Hindus rather than upon the efficacy of “the sacred truth” of his cause. He perceives Hindu “superstitions” to be:

[T]oo intimately connected with the temporal prosperity of its inhabitants, with the established opinions, with the laws, and even with the climate of the country to be universally subverted, but by a train of moral and political events, which should equally emancipate their minds from antiquated error, in which they were absorbed, and which should destroy the fundamental principles of their loose and ill-digested government. (196)

Hilarion’s attitudes towards Hinduism reflect Western claims of ascendancy over the East. Clearly, Horatio views Luxima’s religious beliefs as idolatrous and wrong (“antiquated error”) and he imposes his “truthful” religion upon her. Hilarion’s use of the term “loose” to describe the Indian government implies the natives’ sexual as well as moral slackness, invoking the representational stereotypes of India so prevalent in the time period. That he sees “a train of moral and political events” as necessary to the salvation of the Hindus suggests that he views the missionary and civilizing projects as inextricably linked. His morally superior attitude toward the Indians reflects his conceptualization of Hindus and Christians as falling into binary oppositions of East and West; immoral and moral; antiquated and modern; and male and female.

Owenson’s novel reiterates these binaries primarily in the characters of Luxima and Hilarion: “she, like the East, luxuriant and lovely; he like the West, lofty and commanding” (109). Luxima is presented as sensuous and emotional, even deranged at times, while Hilarion embodies Western (self-) control and reason. Luxima’s commitment to her “impious idolatries” makes Hilarion profoundly uncomfortable, and his initial observation of her devotion to Camdeo, the God of Mystic Love at once fascinates him and inspires him with horror and disgust: “He considered the false Prophetess the most fatal opponent to his intentions, and he looked to her conversion as the most effectual means to accomplish the success of his missions” (100). Fearing her influence as a woman and religious leader, he hopes to subdue her, to “shade the brow of the Heathen Priestess with the sacred veil of the Christian nun” (100). Hilarion, in short, wishes to veil her, belying the Western claim to liberate the oppressed women of the East. It is not surprising
that, as Sophie Gilmartin has pointed out, the ritual of placing a woman in a convent parallels the sacrifice of the Hindu widow as a kind of “European sati.” Hilarion’s desire to possess and control Luxima reveals his own anxiety of identity and the fragility of his own faith: “To listen to her was dangerous; for the eloquence of genius and feeling ... gave a force to her errors and a charm to her look, which weakened even the zeal of conversion in the priest.” (126) As the Other of the East, Luxima at once threatens and tempts him.

The Dominicans – rather than Hilarion – do in fact subdue Luxima’s Otherness with the “sacred veil of a Christian nun,” and they likewise confine Hilarion to the Santa Casa to await his own sacrifice alongside two “relapsed Indians” (248). The text makes clear the “disgusting and absurd cruelty” of the forced conversion of the Hindus in two separate footnotes that explain that Indians are not punished by the Inquisition unless they have been baptized, because then they are viewed – as Luxima eventually is – as “lapsed Christians” (243 and 244). Owenson points to the potential violence of rituals that reify repressive hegemonic boundaries. Although Luxima resists conversion and escapes the nunnery with the help Hilarion’s pundit acquaintance, she now resides in a vulnerable threshold space:

Driven with shame and obloquy from the alter of Brahma, her life had become forfeit by the laws of the Inquisition as a relapsed Christian ... she had forfeited cast, according to all the awful rites of Brahminical excommunication. It was therefore impossible to restore her to her own cast, and difficult to preserve her from the power of her new religion (242).

Because Luxima has broken a plethora of religious and social laws – Catholic and Hindu – she is alienated and criminalized. In her isolation, she suffers a mental derangement, “the melancholy insanity of sorrow”; in this state, she sits quite still, “sometimes murmuring a Brahmin hymn, sometimes a Christian prayer” (251). However, Owenson points out that Luxima’s confusion derives specifically from her confinement in the convent. When she first sees Hilarion on the pyre, his figure strikes her “like a light from heaven on her darkened mind ... love and reason returned together; intelligence revived to influence of affection – she felt, and thought, and acted – whatever his fate, she resolved to share it” (251). Luxima’s devotion and innate strength fuel her resolve. In addition, her excess of identity, emblematized by the adornment of her caste marks and cross as she jumps on the fire, permits her to maintain her commitment to both her spiritual and her earthly loves. By performing sati, Luxima reclaims her identity as a Hindu and affirms her love for Hilarion, bridging the gap between her
religious and emotional commitments.

The Missionary introduces sati as Luxima’s decision rather than as a cultural imperative imposed upon her by the elders of her community or family. In fact, several times throughout the novel she articulates her wish to die with Hilarion, and when she sees him on the pyre, she calls out to Brahma to eternally unite their spirits (251). Luxima’s chanting of the Gayatra – the chant pronounced before voluntary immolation – and her invocation of Brahma conveys her intention of performing and her accordance with the ritual of sati. Moreover, her prerogative of choice is established earlier in the text when the reader learns that Luxima in fact chose not to commit sati when she was married and widowed as a young girl. Her husband died while on a pilgrimage, but before their relationship was consummated. Unlike many Hindu women, she had options: her unique status as a widow, virgin and member of the Brahmin class afforded her the alternative of becoming a Brachmachira, a rare order of vestals who make pilgrimages and prophesies, living a life of chastity and purity. Rather than enduring the widow’s lot of shame and poverty, Luxima becomes a celebrated community leader who wields religious, social and economic power. The Missionary thus represents Luxima as a sort of Superwoman, embodying all the traits (and more) thought to be ideal in the Hindu woman. A pundit explains the elevated status of Hindu women – especially Luxima – to Hilarion:

Pure and tender, faithful and pious, zealous alike in their fondness and their faith, they immolate themselves as martyrs to both, and expire on the pile which consumes the objects of their affection, to inherit the promise which religion holds out to their hopes; for the heaven of an Indian woman is the eternal society of whom she loved on earth. In all the religions of the East, woman has held a decided influence, either as a priestess or a victim.

The choices for Indian women – victim or priestess – denote their lamentably limited realm of power. But Luxima exceeds the traditional expectations of Hindu women in her possession of social, economic and religious power in addition to the possession of her sat. For her, joining Hilarion in death signals her perfect moment of “triumph and sacrifice” (249). In this way, Luxima’s determination to commit sati calls attention to the agency she can exert over herself as well as to the troubling means by which women contribute to the transmission of Indian culture.

The ritual of sati parallels Hindu wedding rituals, because both are important rites of passage for the Indian woman. Sati conflates women’s symbolic death (or loss of identity) through marriage with a literal death that
is itself symbolic of marriage. The overlapping of wedding and funerary rituals in Owenson’s *The Missionary* (an issue in her *The Wild Irish Girl* as well) illuminates a model that Rush Rehm terms “marriage to death.”[^35] Marriage and funerary rituals, Rehm explains, are similarly constitutive of family and community.[^36] A wedding ties together two families, creating a new conjugal unit, while families or communities often coalesce around the deceased in order to reaggregate. Recalling Victor Turner, Rehm writes that these rituals share a tripartite structure consisting of a separation from the old phase, transition through a liminal period, and incorporation into the new phase. The liminal period is particularly crucial, because it provides an “opportunity for disordered play that serves as the seedbeds of cultural creativity.”[^37] Luxima’s performance of sati enacts this kind of cultural creativity by uniting the Goan Hindu population against colonial Spanish forces.

An important aspect of Rehm’s marriage to death model is the possibility for the rituals that are supposed to be constitutive of the family to fail to achieve the desired transition. He notes that in tragedy, these rituals are often shifted and confused to provide experiences of “instability, to shake the audience out of comforting notions of order and to challenge accepted social or ideational norms.”[^38] Luxima’s sati ritual cannot achieve the desired transition, because Hilarion is not her husband, and their union is not sanctioned by her community or family. She therefore challenges social, political and cultural norms expected of her as a woman, a Hindu, and a Priestess. Furthermore, Luxima’s appearance on the pyre sets in motion a series of tragic events: when Hilarion snatches Luxima from the flames, the officers of the Inquisition accidentally stab her in the heart. She thus calls upon Brahma, inciting the Hindu audience into action:

> They believed it was their god who addressed them from her lips – they rushed forward with a hideous cry, to rescue his priestess – and to they rushed forward to avenge the long-slighted cause of their religion and their freedom;—they fell with fury on the Christians, they rushed upon the cowardly guards of the Inquisition, who let fall their arms and fled in dismay. (250)

As a repository of Hinduism, Luxima symbolizes its oppression by both imperialist and colonialist forces. Her self-immolation creates an important point of resistance that, to again quote Rehm, challenges “values and modes of behavior represented by male authority.”[^39] Undermining the power of the Inquisitional officers, challenging Spanish colonial rule, and mobilizing her compatriots out of their torpor, the novel represents Luxima’s performance of sati as a voluntary act of rebellion and devotion.

Although Hilarion does not save Luxima’s soul, he does save her from
the flames of his funeral pyre, invoking the historical debate surrounding colonialist responses to sati or, in Spivak’s words, “white men saving brown women from brown men.” The subsequent rebellion of the Hindu masses creates the diversion necessary for Hilarion and Luxima to escape. In other words, Luxima’s attempted self-immolation creates the environment that rescues her “rescuer” from his own death. Hilarion’s situation brings into relief his own position as a colonized other and emasculated victim.

While Luxima’s self-immolation is voluntary, Hilarion is forced to commit a kind of sati. Hilarion accepts his fate as irrevocable, and he approaches the altar with dignity; however, he does not choose death. Hilarion ultimately renounces his faith, his missionary project, and his Western roots. Urging Luxima to resist her approaching death, Hilarion exclaims,

Dearest and most unfortunate, our destinies are now inseparably united! … Alike condemned by our religions and our countries, there now remains nothing on earth for us but each other! Already have we met the horrors of death without its repose; and the life for which thou hast offered the precious purchase of thine own, must now belong alone to me (255)

Although Luxima might be willing to commit sati in order to be eternally united with her lover, she will not die without renewing her commitment to Brahma; in fact she had never truly converted to Christianity. As she explains to Hilarion, “It was thou I followed, and not thy doctrines; for pure and sublime as they may be, they came darkly and confusedly to my soul” (231). This passage indicates that Luxima had surrendered to Hilarion on an emotional rather than a spiritual level, and significantly, that his missionary efforts have ultimately failed. Luxima’s final words urge Hilarion to disseminate her story and preach religious tolerance. Instead, he returns to Kashmir and practices an amalgamation of Christianity and Hinduism until his own death. Hilarion’s capitulation signals the failure of the missionary and civilizing projects as well as a deficit of character, of zeal, and of faith. Conversely, Luxima’s excess, her layers of faith, love and passion, permit her to ultimately uphold her loyalty to her Hindu religion and her Catholic lover.

Owenson’s heroine’s typically demonstrate a profound commitment to their religious and national identities, performing rituals that link an oppressed past with a liberated future. In 1859 Owenson republished her novel as Luxima the Prophetess, changing the title to reflect the novel’s true protagonist. By this time, sati had been long-outlawed. After its abolition in 1829, many native Hindus feared that the practice of sati would inspire the wrath of the British police, a concern that conflicted with deeply
ingrained cultural beliefs. Consequently, in 1857, colonial India witnessed another rebellion, reminiscent of the incident at Vellore in that its source was an affront to Indian religion and culture. In retrospect, Owenson seemed in 1811 herself a prophetess, foretelling that this permutation of cultural and religious intolerance would set the vexed tone in India for a long time to come.

Owenson disseminates the story that Hilarion failed to tell, a story of patriarchal control, religious persecution and colonial oppression. However, it is significant that Luxima does not actually die on the pyre, but instead she dies being rescued from it. The novel’s conclusion thus successfully skirts the issue – the material reality of sati. Indeed, for Owenson, as for many others, the sati functions as an ahistorical symbol of the oppression of women and of the subaltern, and she perhaps unwittingly represents and reproduces the double colonization of her heroine. In *The Missionary* the subaltern does in fact speak, but Owenson’s novel – replete with essentialist stereotypes – exposes the problems inherent in giving her voice.

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**NOTES**


2 Owenson in fact staged a comic opera for her father entitled *The First Attempt, or the Whim of a Moment* (1807) in order to bring the retired actor back on stage. Claire Connolly views this production as designed to “extract maximum gain from the popular interest in both her writing and her reputation” Connolly, Claire. " "I Ac-
Sati can refer to the practice of self-immolation as well as to the woman who performs the act. While in English “sati” refers primarily to the act, Hindi employs the latter usage.

The D’Acugna family were historically associated with Portuguese revolution and reformation.


Many of these accounts responded to the 1987 immolation of the young widow Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan, which incited a public controversy. In the case of Kanwar, the war waged between those modernists (especially feminists) who view sati as murder and pro-sati traditionalists (mostly men).

Lati Mani, for example, argues in *Contentious Traditions* that these widows were not the subjects but “rather, the ground for a complex and competing set of struggles over Indian society and definitions of Hindu tradition” (2). Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, too, considers this problem, suggesting that we investigate “both the subjective pain and the objective spectacle that this shift reveals.” “The Subject of Sati: Pain and Death in the Contemporary Discourse on Sati”, *The Yale Journal of Criticism: Interpretation in the Humanities* 3.2 (Spring 1990), 1-27, p. 2. Oldenburg offers a thorough analysis of feminist responses to Kanwar’s death, including demonstrations and detailed reports, in John Hawley, ed., *The Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India* (New York: Oxford, 1994), pp. 101-127. See also in the same volume Ashis Nandy’s “Sati as Profit Versus Sati as Spectacle” (131-148) and “Widows as Cultural Symbols” by Ainslie T. Embree (149-158).

Pompa Banerjee’s insightful reply to Spivak identifies the paradox central to the issue: “It appears then that the sati did speak….She spoke willfully only at the instant of the extinction of her own will”. Pompa Banerjee, *Burning Women: Widows, Witches, and Early Modern European Travelers in India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 191.


Luxima had been previously married when she was very young, but her husband died before they consummated the relationship. Because she was a widow and a virgin, as well as part of the Brahmin class, she was able to become a Brachmachira. See below, page 43.

Lindsey Harlan explains that the future of the sati varies in different accounts. Either she and her husband live eternally in heaven, or they are reincarnated to-

13 Hawley and Wulff, *Devi*, p. 6. For a discussion of goddess and goddess worship see Hawley and Wulff’s Prologue.


15 Hawley, *Sati*, p. 15.


19 Many accounts of the practice explain that the widow was often thought to blame for her husband’s death because she failed at her task of protection. Practically, of course, the men often died first because older men usually married younger women.


21 Quoted in Narasimhan, p. 33. Ainslie Embree argues that Roy’s concern was primarily for women who did not burn; he was preoccupied with the condition of women, especially widows, in Hindu society (156).

22 By the middle of the eighteenth-century, Britain’s East India Company had begun to function as a state, and Warren Hastings instituted a series of reforms that hinged upon a policy of nonintervention. The Orientalist Sir William Jones (the founder of the Asiatick society of Bengal) and Edmund Burke, among others, agreed with Hastings that imposing a foreign legal system on indigenous people would potentially incite rebellion. The EIC’s agenda was clearly dominated by the drive for commercial or imperial success, but regardless of their motives, the late eighteenth-century witnessed a wide range of orientalist scholarship. Unfortunately, the Hastings impeachment trials caused British attitudes toward India to devolve into contempt and suspicion. As Parliament tightened its control over the EIC, Victorian administrators attempted to assimilate the Indian people by anglicizing them. Julia Wright, Introduction to *The Missionary* (Broadview, 2003), p. 26.

23 British texts on the subject avoided mentioning the significant prohibition of the ritual by women who were menstruating, though the Hindu treatises and commentaries mentioned it specifically. Hawley, *Sati*, p. 182.

24 See Andrea Major’s *Pious Flames* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) for a discussion of nineteenth-century British preoccupation with gender, suicide and religion. She suggests that colonial knowledge has more to do with cultural similarities that the binary opposition of East and West.

25 See Lati Mani’s *Contentious Traditions* for an excellent discussion of these accounts.

27 Julia Wright, Introduction to The Missionary, p. 51.

28 Dorothy Figueira writes that Continental (as opposed to English) representations of sati often vilified Brahmin priests as a means for rationalist enlightenment thinkers, especially in France, to criticize the failings of Christian clerics without naming them explicitly. Dorothy Figuiera, “Sati in European Culture” in Hawley, Sati, p. 62.

29 See Julia Wright for a discussion of the Muslim conspiracy in her Introduction to The Missionary pp. 27-29. Quote from p. 28.


31 Julia Wright suggests that Owenson may have added the footnotes that cite Stockdale, who published her novel, when she switched from her previous publisher to him. Stockdale definitely published the History of the Inquisition, and it is likely that he authored it as well. Wright, p. 44.


34 The pundit explains that Luxima has inherited the family wealth, according to the Laws of Menu, but Wright points out that Owenson misquotes the laws of Menu and that Luxima would not have been the legal heir. Wright, p. 272.


36 Rehm, A Marriage to Death, pp. 4-10.

37 Rehm, A Marriage to Death, p. 5.

38 Rehm, A Marriage to Death, p. 9.

39 Rehm, A Marriage to Death, p. 9.


41 Harlan defines a martyr as one who defends a notion of truth unto death, but does not choose death. In Hawley and Wulff, Devi, p. 121.