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## ► To cite this version:

Annie Montaut. Popular Culture of Himalayan Women in English Writing. T. Shakur & K. D'Souza. Picturing South Asian Culture in English, Open House Press, on line publication, 2003. halshs-00753139

**HAL Id: halshs-00753139**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00753139>**

Submitted on 17 Nov 2012

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**Popular culture of Himalayan Women in English Writing**

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INALCO/CNRS

**published in**

***Picturing South Asian Culture in English***

**T. Shakur & K. D'Souza eds**

**Open House Press**

**2003**

It is sometimes thought that the sense of history has been granted to India as part of the colonial legacy, but still very much lacking in the popular expression of the local culture<sup>1</sup>. Myths and stories are systematically opposed to history in the shaping of Indian culture, and history, as a way of looking at one's past and present, is thought to be only available in the form of the so-called westernized writing, whether it consists in the scholarly studies of historians or in the fictional work of modern creative writers. Understanding the past and the present as separate and linked requires the ability of discriminating causes and consequences, isolating things and events from each other, disentangling real facts from mental constructions, contingent events from eternity, looking at facts from an "objective" position, that is, first, having some notion of the border separating inner and outer world, subject and object, extracting one self from the moving and otherwise ungraspable sea of events: taking an external, objective stand. To sum up: rationality. Without such rationality, a gift from the Western Enlightenment<sup>2</sup>, it is thought impossible to reach democracy, which is grounded on the recognition of subject as an individual responsible entity, susceptible of knowledge as power of discrimination. The question of myth or history as the salient feature of the present Indian "way of thinking" is then far reaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Hence resulting in a split between the intellectual elite and the popular mass, as stated in Nandy (2001 : 41-2) : « Fonder une identité historique dans une société historique entraîne une complexité de second ordre quand cette identité n'obtient pas l'adhésion consensuelle de la communauté ou de la culture au sens plus large ( ) ; l'Inde compte encore de très nombreuses communautés ou personnes qui vivent avec des idéologies fondées sur des modes non historiques de reconstruction du passé ». For a more developed discussion of this « assumption that cultures living by myths are ahistorical and thus representative of an earlier, second-rate social consciousness », see Nandy 1998 (2 : 60-63).

<sup>2</sup> Eighteenth century « lights » originally stemmed out from the French "philosophers" around Voltaire and Diderot, who started questioning the fundamental legitimacy of faith in matters of scientific knowledge and political government, eventually leading to the French Revolution.

### 1. A culture of the self-with-the-gods and without history?

A very striking description of this state of affairs is given in Naipaul's first look at the land of his ancestors. Let us first look at this exemplary view of the Indian way of thinking, which typically confirms the danger of non historical stand imputed to it, before contrasting it with an English writing women on her local culture and its relevance to the question of history and democracy.

In *An Area of Darkness* (1964), written at the end of the Nehruvian period, as well as in *A Wounded Civilization* (1977), written during the Emergency State<sup>3</sup>, Naipaul repeatedly stigmatises what he calls "a defect of vision"<sup>4</sup>, responsible in his eyes for the general failure of modernization and democracy. The root of the disease of this "diseased society" which he analyses, according to him, lies in the failure to see, in correlation with the inner retrieval, denial, quest for mystical escape and obsession of purity and cast. An example oft repeated of this defect of vision, which he borrows from a mysterious observer is the squatting figures of defecating Indians on river banks or railway tracks. "These squatting figures are never spoken of; they are never written about; they are not mentioned in novels or in stories; they do not appear in feature films or documentaries. This might be regarded as a part of a permissible prettifying intention. But the truth is that Indians do not see these squatters and might even, with complete sincerity, deny that they exist: a collective blindness arising out of the Indian fear of pollution and the resulting conviction that Indians are the cleanest people in the world" (1977: 70). Not being seen, being denied as every disturbing object, the existence of such figures, or of other "unbearable" images of poverty and beggars, need no explication and no attempt to change conditions which made them as they appear.<sup>5</sup> The same observer then is confronted in the train with a smiling upercast traveller who agrees to shift berth but appears totally unwilling and unable to lift himself his bedding and suitcase and reflects on the typical Indian reluctance towards physical labour and on the "Indian callousness" revealing "a sad want of consideration for others" both derived from cast consciousness. At this point it appears that the mysterious observer, who "is seeing what no Indian sees" is no other than Gandhi. Gandhi's power to change India into a really social democracy originates from his ability to see. But the interesting correlation Naipaul repeatedly emphasizes<sup>6</sup> is the colonial modernity in

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<sup>3</sup> Imposed in 1975 by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, an authoritative gesture against liberal trends which cost her the power at the next elections won by the opposing party (Janata).

<sup>4</sup> Chapters « The Colonial » is in the first book, « A Defect of Vision » in the second, first one in a section entitled « no ideas, but Obsessions ».

<sup>5</sup> The second book, written in the time of the official slogan *garibi hatao*, "remove poverty" lengthily explains that the way this motto is emphasized throughout the country does not echo a real attempt to remedy social evils but a passionate love for images, symbols and empty slogans.

<sup>6</sup> Which is now not so original, a number of historians having interpreted part of the Gandhian political ethos as foreign.

Gandhi's look and his ability to criticize, analyse, contrast, act. "He saw India so clearly because he was in part a colonial. ( ) Gandhi never loses the critical, comparing South African eye; he never rhapsodizes, except in the vague Indian way, about the glories of ancient India" His emphasis on defecation and sanitation is deemed "correct" because "sanitation was linked to cast, cast to callousness, inefficiency and a hopelessly divided country, division to weakness, weakness to foreign rule" (1964: 74). Gandhi's obsessions (the spirit of service, excrement, bread-labour, the dignity of scavenging) hang together" they answer the directness of his colonial vision" They oppose the "Indian" vision which does not recognize the value of labour nor the spirit of service<sup>7</sup>. They also oppose the "medieval mentality" which refuses to see disturbing historical facts and clings to a vision of homogeneity and continuity, integrating new facts into traditional schemes which neutralize them, creating "a world, which, with all its ups and downs, remained harmoniously ordered and could be taken for granted" a world which, for this very reason, "failed to develop a sense of history, which is a sense of loss"(1964: 144).

Now, if the defect of vision is so crucial in the Indian "social disease" resulting in a general denial of reality and lack of the sense of history, how to account for it? Naipaul does so by exploring the genesis of the subject, with the help of the Indian psychoanalyst Kakar<sup>8</sup>. What Naipaul quotes from personal communication can be found in a more detailed fashion in *The Inner World* (1978). The denial of reality and inner retrieval both observed in different ways is to be correlated with an "underdevelopment of the self" for the Indian ego, reality has a very tenuous existence, real objects in the outside world are not clearly distinguished from the inner experience. Such a stage, normal in childhood, is typical in adult life of what Freud called the primary narcissism, encouraged in India by the extended family pattern: the fusion with the mother as internalised object, maintained far longer than in the West, and the diversity and inter-changeability of authority figures (father identification figures), profusion of deities and human figures on the same level of reality, make the child unwilling to separate and perceive himself as a separate subject confronting a separate object, and also unfit for responsible attitudes, hence further prone to submissiveness (renouncement: inward retrieval and authority of the guru). The analysis of children drawings, full up to the brim with various human and divine figures with no

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<sup>7</sup> Even the great classical texts which form the bulk of the Hindu culture, even the « selfless action » advocated in the Gita is analysed by Naipaul as an encouragement to selfishness : see the example of the picnic on the banks of a river, someone is drowning in front of the people and nobody will rescue him because it is not in the prescribed dharma (each cast has its dharma, each individual his function, no action outside this function is expected from him, and each has his private *contract* with God). Needless to say, Nandy (for instance) has a totally different vision of Gandhi's pragmatism (1998-2: 62).

<sup>8</sup> Who at the time of his meetings with Naipaul in preparation of the book, was himself preparing his first book *The Inner World* (1978). See on this point particularly the section in Kakar (1978: 108-112) and Lannoy (1975: 111sq, 210).

centre identifiable, leads Lannoy (1975), after Erikson (1970), to similar interpretations of a psychologically immature ego in the Indian self<sup>9</sup>. Kakar concludes that such a behaviour and "underdeveloped ego" if is not socially sanctioned as neurotic behaviour as it would be in the West, is a "dangerous luxury" for a new modern country in changing times like Independent India, a conclusion unquestioned and emphasized in Naipaul (1977: 111)<sup>10</sup>. However, it is not the danger, but the benefits which are enhanced in some of the popular creative narratives in contemporary India.

## 2. Story-telling, myth creative interpretation, and history

Although reaching similar interpretations which point to the Indian "primary narcissism" Erikson and Lannoy do not emphasize the danger of it in the same way as Kakar. Kakar's view point regarding the influence of the lore and myth on the Indian psyche has indeed been proved to voice a typically male brahmanic viewpoint (Raheja & Gold 1996: 32-38). The woman submissive ideal modelled after Sita as well as the split image of woman sexuality (when uncontrolled, a threat for men, when under control, denied) is only one possible way of reading the mythology that permeates every day life and thought, and this way of reading is quite typical of the dominant elite, both traditional and westernized. Besides, such a view is based on a notion of culture as "a mode of thought that incarcerates the native in a fixed and definite way of thinking" strongly criticized by Appadurai (1988: 37-8). Using the same referential literary frame (classical mythology) as Kakar, but extending to the more popular and local lore of Himalayan goddesses, Mrinal Pande in an English written half fictional half auto-biographical report on local culture unveils the women view-point on their own self ideal as drawn from their own interpretation of the myths. In this rather strange narrative, which intertwines English adaptations of the major classical myths from the epics and puranas, popular stories from the local lore, the family saga centered on the figure of the Grand Mother Bari Amma, and reports of social workers fighting for the rights of women, the English writing novelist and journalist advocates a very different vision<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Among which the inability of the object-subject adult relation (Lannoy 1975 : 111). Children drawings inspired Erikson -1970: 40) the following: "If one finally asks what (and, indeed, *where*) is the "exciting scene" one finds it embedded somewhere where nobody could have discerned it and certainly not as a central one. ( ) significant moments embedded in a moving sea of unfathomable multiformity ( ). One moves in a space-time so filled with visual and auditory occurrences that it is very difficult to lift an episode out of the flux of events, a fact out of the stream of feelings, a circumscribed relationship out of a fusion of multiple encounters. If, in all this, I should endow one word with a meaning which unites it all, the word is fusion"

<sup>10</sup> Who quotes from personal communications with the psychoanalyst in the late seventies. The feudal mentality and lack of sense of history generated by such an "underdeveloped ego" is according to him responsible from the deviation of democratic tools into mere symbols and empty images to be worshipped.

<sup>11</sup> *Devi. Tales of the Goddess in Our Time*, was published by Penguins India in 1996. Bracketted page numbers with no other mention of name and date refer to this edition.

Although she provides her own interpretation by rephrasing and commenting the stories, and by arranging the fragments of myth or lore and the sequences of social action within a global narrative structure which clearly shows how the first generates the latter, the bulk of her material is in itself a fist-hand interpretation quite illustrative of the women-folk viewpoint on their own agency.

Telling the story of the hungry daughter-in-law (‘‘Once there was this woman who had a real shrew for a mother-in-law’’), Mrinal Pande in *Devi* wants to illustrate a cultural state where human beings and goddesses were the same stuff, and women lived their ‘‘kanyahood’’ on par with the goddesses, perceived themselves as part of the same world and at the same level of reality and dignity. She also illustrates the legacy of courage and rebellion infused by a certain reading of classical and popular Hindu mythology, through the character of major and minor goddesses, a source of inspiration for many women, simple house wives and social workers. This daughter-in-law was, of course, exploited and starved by the shrew until the day when, deprived of a single morsel of bitter gourds, her favourite dish, she steals some and flies to the temple of the village goddess to eat happily the curry and rice far from indiscrete looks before hurrying back home. The goddess is amazed and cups her hands under her chin in sign of disapproval. Later, when the villagers come, they find the idol in this strange position, the whole village trembles and the old priests start looking for the culprit who has angered the goddess. The young woman flies back to the temple, crosses her arms and says to the goddess: ‘‘Who do you think you are? Where you never a wife and a daughter-in-law? Do you not know how many ruses a daughter-in-law must employ in order to survive in her mother-in-law’s house? What kind of a woman are you, pretending to be shocked I stole in and ate a bit of curry and rice in front of you? Have you no shame? Put your hand down now, or I will hit you on the head with my pot’’ (123). The goddess came back to her initial position and the young woman went to tell the old priests that they must have had hallucinations.

If older listeners to the story would ‘‘praise the young woman cleverness and modesty in keeping her defiance of oppression and successful challenge a secret’’ identifying with her as survivors to an unfair system, many in the younger generation would see only a sad example of the oppressive patriarchal society and condemn the goddess anger, religion being women’s enemy. M. Pande does not interpret this variance as a decline in faith in educated urban youth, but as a ‘‘basic change’’ in relating to the Devi. For elders and those who made up such legends, goddesses were familiar figures in literal meaning, people who shared the same transcendent principle of being *kanyas*, and as such, were to be addressed as sisters, with whom one could ‘‘share a sari or a pod of tamarind or a flower garland’’ and who should commit herself to protect her sister in a mutual

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Mrinal Pande, daughter of the Hindi writer Shivani, started writing Hindi fiction before shifting to English.

bond. Such a view of kanyahood is obviously at variance with the male concept of *kanya* and *kanyadan*, according to which women are passive objects to be given away for ritual purpose and the welfare of the whole community: the daughter-in-law of the story drives a rebellious energy from her kanyahood which subverts the patriarchal hierarchy and mocks the pandits. What is obvious from both the story and its comment is the ironical ambivalence of the girl's protest, an irony which always acted as a sideway towards emancipation (Ramanujan 1989). This ambivalence, which allows her to subvert the patriarchal law, may well be considered as a true manifestation of subaltern consciousness, once we assume that subaltern voice should not be essentialized into a "self-originating self-determining individual who is at once a subject in his possession of a sovereign consciousness whose defining quality is reason, and an agent in his power of freedom (O'Hanlon 1988: 191)"<sup>12</sup>. There is no doubt Pande's actors are subaltern voices and that they voice a specific link between legend and history, radically distinct from the sociologist or modern historian for whom there can be no continuity between them. But nowadays there is no longer room for "such happy affinity" among modern urban intellectuals, the strength derived by listening to and believing in such tales is lost, a strength which made women efficient agents, assertive even if not openly confronting religious laws, still defiling in their way the brahmanical ethos and village customs. Moreover, M. Pande goes on, by leaving the lore to backward rural masses, and "ignoring story and legend, we deprive ourselves from history"

This is a provocative conclusion, very much opposed to the sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers or historians for whom there is an irretrievable lakshman-rekha separating history and myth<sup>13</sup>.

I won't dwell on the exact meaning of "history" in Mrinal Pande's view here. What is certain is that this notion of hers is consistently illustrated throughout the book by examples of social protest, both individual and collective, aiming at building a participative democracy. So there is a relation between the popular way of living in and with lore and myth as the basic mental frame, and the building of social justice in a democratic state like India. Many such connections are explicitly drawn in the book, many implicitly, always relating a particular interpretation of the religious tradition and lore with its contemporary relevance. A particular interpretation: as suggested about the "five memorable ones" -- Ahilya,

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<sup>12</sup> This essentialisation has been criticized by Spivak (1985a) who emphasizes the non continuity, absence of self determination of actually heterogeneous and discontinuous discourses. But she also says that women's "self abasement" makes them unable to represent themselves and to "speak in a language other than patriarchal authority" a "repeated emptying of her meaning as instrument" (Spivak 1985b: 362). Guha too, in his famous paper on dominance without hegemony (1989), acknowledges the contradictory and fragmented nature of the subaltern consciousness.

<sup>13</sup> Even Ashish Nandy who is not ready to suppress the cultural value of myth accepts its opposition to history when he states that most people even now in India are living in a myth-like cultural frame and untouched by the historical mentality.

Kunti, Draupadi, Tara and Mandodari. These five rebellious women created by the "drop-outs" Vyasa and Valmiki "out of their own wayward life" may be judged very differently according to one's view-point: from the prevailing popular conformism as well as from the bourgeois stand, and the right wing interpretation, such women have gone into trouble because of their wish to claim for their rights and their desire for freedom, instead of being submissive, and they have destroyed themselves, their men and their clan, like Draupadi, who caused the cataclysmic great war of Mahabharat. Already shared between five husbands, the Pandava brothers, after the inadvertent word of the mother-in-law, Draupadi was sold to the other clan in a dice game, then publicly humiliated by being dragged by her hair and unclothed, ultimately saved by the god Krishna<sup>14</sup>, leaving so much hatred and rage between both clans that the most terrible war started, because of her non submissiveness. But "myths breathe different secrets for story-tellers as they forage for them in damp family vaults" they show that such female rebels "may be victimized, stifled and oppressed but never silenced" (167). As such a story-teller, Pande inter-twins stories from the myth, here Draupadi's or Kunti's story, to relations of modern combative women who fought for their rights when unjustly beaten, gang-raped, unheard by the police, like the story of Banwari Bai, a potter's wife and social worker gang raped by a village lobby after the shop has been ransacked, who finally managed to win her cause by involving other social workers and women groups; the story of Draupadi Bai, elected as *sarpanch* (village head) and gang raped by the other members of the village council in November 1995, who symbolically refused to do her hair like the other Draupadi and started roaming the whole State in quest for justice, to such a point that she gathers popular support and people stand with her calling her molesters Dushasana and Duryodhana (names of the villains in the *Mahabharat*). The heroines of the great myths and popular legends still infuse their strength and spirit of justice to the present actors, and the dark *shakti* (a word which means strength, and divinities associated with shaivism and Kali the Goddess of destruction) are still visible in the "fibrous wrists" and "corded necks" of the innumerable female labourers struggling for their life whenever they stand up against injustice, exploited but not silenced. Such goddesses as Ahilya or Draupadi, even now, specially now, concludes Pande, "must be asked to lend us their tenacity and their rage, so we may comment on our travesty of democracy, on globalisation and labour laws all of which burn women alive on funeral pyres and then look beyond the flame and chant: 'Sati Mata ki jai!' may our glorious, self-negating mothers live long!" (167)<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> At this point of despair and rage in front of the passivity of her legitimate protectors, she invokes Krishna and he makes the sari infinite, so that the more it unfolds the more numerous new folds appear to veil her body.

<sup>15</sup> A very famous story of this kind is that of Phoolan Devi, the Bandit Queen, who herself became of popular mythic figure (a goddess: Devi) in her rebellious crusade against the landlords clan that gang-raped her initially. The link with the vindictive goddesses has been of crucial importance in the formation of her clan. Until her death (she was murdered



The story of the earth (mother earth) bears a similar lesson: rudely exploited and betrayed by her children (settlers and nomads) first, then by Prajapati (the creator) harassing her for giving more and more, the gentle and bountiful Medini (that was her first name: made of fat) then became enraged and resolves to become infertile. When Prithu tries to settle the matters in a harsh way she turns into a cow to escape his arrows and asks him to turn into a calf and gently milk her, metaphorizing earthy love as the need for kindness and the rage at being sold piece-meal, as well as suggesting that generosity (in wives and mothers) should not be wrongly mistaken for passivity. Prithu bows to this legitimate claim, then adopts her as his daughter, hence her name Prithvi<sup>16</sup> (90).

Those are some of the "different secrets" that myths "breathe to story-tellers" and their listeners. And they interest the understanding of action in modern changing world, because they all show that the continuity of legend and social consciousness, voiced and heard from the non dominant viewpoint, does not rule out the sense for democratic action.

### 3. English writing of the lore: a special brew

The art of story-telling has developed in Badi Amma's family (narrator's grand-mother, who provides the frame of the narrative<sup>17</sup>) in a way that both continues the traditional art of passing down the bulk of popular lore and myths and articulates this tradition with modernity and English. Badi Amma herself, once a young rebellious girl educated in the Sanskrit scriptures and astrology by her grand-father since her absent father, doing his "service" in far away places, could not be a proper recipient of the grand paternal knowledge, kept outside family bounds until her thirties and then married a foreign returned medical doctor, "the good doctor" the "celebrated dandy in the Edwardian tradition" an embodiment of western rationality<sup>18</sup> totally indifferent to popular worship. The new story-telling

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last year in front of the Parliament in 2001), after she came out of jail, she became a political leader and stood in defence of the offended and struggled for more justice at the state and nation level.

<sup>16</sup> Medini, from *meda*, the fat from twin monsters killed by Vishnu-Narayana, is otherwise named *bhumi*, "a land that yielded a steady supply of nourishing and rejuvenating food" (89).

<sup>17</sup> And inspirator of the writer: near the fire-place in her home, in winter "the stories thawed and flowed, in summer they blossomed and blossomed. Badi Amma is the Mahadevi enthroned in the very heart of the literary no-man's land where women roam as goddesses. She is the Gangotri from which all my tales flow, gurgling, happy and wayward, or unhappy and sullen" (p. 182).

<sup>18</sup> The circumstances of the first encounter and love at first sight are such: the westernised dandy, a frail and refined man, condemned to come back in his Himalayan birth place because of climatic reasons (a lung disease) arrives in a palanquin and sees the massive young lady on the side of the path, busy painting flowers. The very next moment she starts painting the Kumarasambhava décor and dreaming of love and speaking birds. Her devotion is intense, yet very "personal" and for instance to get her first son, she operates a fantastic puja with a thousand dung *shivalingam* decorated with a thousand and one white

tradition emerges when she discovers that her usually taciturn husband agrees to answer if talked to in English. Starting from this discovery, the passion for stories gets mixed up with the passion for gossip, political information and popular lore, in a mixture of three languages: "she wove Sanskrit with Hindi with the deftness of a master weaver, handling several shuttles at once. Words came alive at her touch, mysterious stories took shape in intricate patterns" and with the English / Hindi mixture (Hindi translation for the children in the initial stages) "new and innovative types of verbal foreplay" took place, a "strange mixture of smooth English seasoned with pungent phrases in Hindi"<sup>19</sup>. In this way the children quickly became themselves master story-tellers, nurtured in this art by both parents according to whom thought and circulated stories are the only way to get youngsters (and adults) understanding right from wrong<sup>20</sup>. They "discovered a most interesting new world through three languages, all of them laced with chillies and garlic. Their skins soaked up the words, their blood the garlic sauce. Their minds further stored away this heady mixture as a preservative for tales"(105). Chilly and garlic do not only refer to the pungency of the style which makes the stories alive and juicy. It concretely refers to the conviviality of eating together while elaborating the stories, making the art of story-telling part of an art of living together, and this living-together a holistic creation with no partition between mental and physical frames, and with spices mattering as much as the objective information provided by a rational, objective, aseptic observation. As for the multilingual expression, it bridges the gulf between "tradition"and "modernity"by something different from a synthetic homogenous fusion: with its "new and innovative"verbal plays, it produces original creations fit for the specific viewpoint of the actors, beyond the traditional split image of mythic feudality and rational history.

But the original feature in this emergence of the renewed art of story-telling is its location: "Since in the world of Lakshmi everything is holy, mud, dung, earth, in Badi Amma's home, the best story sessions were held in the toilets"(106). That too is the gift of the rational modern "good doctor" who wishes his progeny to exhibit their health (and eventually health problems) and relate the hearty food ingested to the final produce of digestion, excretion telling the medical truth of the global economy of body and mind, so that he could keep an eye on the secret story of bodies. Toilets are not only very well visible and objectively focused on in the narrative,

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flowers and grains of rice, such an extraordinary sight that even the unbeliever husband agrees to enter the puja room and bow to them.

<sup>19</sup> « See the *tamasha* that people put up, dear », « O my father, this woman was caught in a *bad bad* act, dropping her *pallav* in front of the deputy ranger sahib », etc. (106)

<sup>20</sup> The way the stories of Vac, the vedic Goddess of speech, and Sarasvati, the Goddess of knowledge and music (the musical transmutation of knowledge and speech : story-telling) are intertwined in the narrative is also significant: Saraswati is also the Goddess who teaches freedom from home-bounds, the power of exile, and creative transmutation of unanswerable questions.

but they are open, collective, emphasized as a locus for culture and chatter<sup>21</sup>. In this way, "family rituals of the collective expelling of dirt" and "community expulsions became the established pattern for the family" the cleansing of bowels, remindful of the chilly and garlic sauce, echoing the most convivial exchange of information on international politics and town gossip in a "happy democratic chatter". This provocative location of culture in this "medical citadel" of the post-independence India nevertheless builds a purely euphoric space for actors willing to articulate both types of knowledge (mythical and modern), euphoric at least "before the Intellectual Property Rights in the Gatt Agreement" (before globalisation's threat to the South)<sup>22</sup>. This location of culture is of course a comical episode in the story. But given its own location as a matrix generating the art of story-telling, and its insistence in the narrative, it must be considered serious too. First as reversing the traditional inhibitions and silence on bodily "dirty" functions, giving them a nobility by emphasizing their cleansing function as did Gandhi : instead of hiding, exhibiting. Then as indirectly mocking the "linguistic turn" of postmodernist analyses of discourse into a "bowel turn" so to speak<sup>23</sup>. "Through art and fart"<sup>24</sup>, a particular earthly togetherness came to bind the souls of Badi Amma's boys for life (109), which goes "against the grain" of both Naipaul's reading of Indian popular culture and some of the postmodernist deconstruction theories busy discarding the universal pretension of concepts like right, justice, democracy: the lesson new story-tellers and listeners grasp from the classical and popular lore in M. Pande is, in part, that exploitation and justice and the claim for justice when rights are trespassed, are universal and not to be defined by regional contextual specificities, and in part, that these specific Goddesses of India and the hills, far from acting as an alienating power and ruling out any historical

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<sup>21</sup> A different thing is the horrified reaction of new comers like the daughter-in-law, "anally retentive convent-educated daughter-in-laws" when they "chanced upon references to this Neanderthal bit of togetherness" endowed with a totally different concept of modernity as the "good doctor"s.

<sup>22</sup> One of the brothers brought up in this creative citadel turns out to become later a firm opponent of the patenting of *neem* tree, a fore runner of Vandana Shiva's Navdania association and world wide protest against the dismantling of South agriculture by global corporations (1988, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> The « discourse turn » or « linguistic turn » in Subaltern Studies, looking through the analysis of the dominant discourse for an ever-elusive subaltern voice, occurred after Guha left the leadership of the group to thinkers like Partha Chatterjee or Dipesh Chakraborthy : « Having an egalitarian society and political democracy may be laudable thoughts in themselves but these thoughts are not as important or as sensitive as the philosophical questions of differences » ("Marx after Marxism"). Initial motivation of Subaltern Studies was in the (dissident) prolongation of Marxism, but the new turn's motivation appear to focus on the discursive analysis (reading "against the grain" of the texts of the "great narrative" other narratives (where "authentic" culture is "really" located) becoming ever and ever elusive.

<sup>24</sup> The alliteration here too is more Indian than English : echo words, as well as reduplication, are part of the creative devices in Indian languages.

consciousness, may to-day act as a powerful incentive in claiming for these rights.

In a more scholarly and academic manner, the tale of the Chipko movement by Guha (1989) very well shows that hill women derived a great deal of their strength and tenacity from their conviction that their trees were sacred, economically vital for the village need and women labour, and a sanctuary consecrated by innumerable stories of trees and mountain deities. *Chipko* means to stick, to embrace: that is how women acted, embracing their trees, when forest officers came to fell trees under a state program. They won. They won with the help of their own relation to their cosmic and mythological environment, resulting in an assertive and active self representation quite opposed to the submissive ideal supposedly derived from it according to the male dominant viewpoint. Accounts of their agency in protests against liquor, a particularly severe threat against regional development, are well documented (Kabeer 1994, Mawdsley 2000): when women from the Uttarakhand Mahila Sangarsh Samiti delivered an ultimatum to liquor and lottery tickets sellers in 1985 otherwise they "would launch a direct fight against them" (Mawdsley 2000: 122), subversion is no longer ambivalent but openly defiling male and state authority, clearly and consciously voicing the aspiration of the dominated. At the root of this rebellious energy is the feeling of the sacred link between man, nature and gods, a supposedly archaic notion which is now gaining more and more credit among environmentalists and supporters of "sustainable development" (Ramakrishna & al. 1998)<sup>25</sup>. The difference between such accounts and Pande's English narrative accounts is precisely in the way things are presented: the narration of women's historical empowerment through their relation to Devi and cosmic powers in the world of tales is itself a story of the same grain as the many tales it re-tells and comments, a story, with room for irony. Same, still slightly different since the story telling voice is English speaking, making the "pre-modern" vision playing its *lila* with and within the colonial language and its mental devices. This makes the subaltern voice a continuous creation, relating myth with life and action transforming the world within a mental frame which continues the child/mythical world into the adult/historical world, evoking the provocative conclusion of Nandy : such a mental frame, instead of being interpreted as an ahistorical bend according to the modern assumption about it, may as well be interpreted as "an Oriental version of the concept of permanent revolution" breaking the determinism of history (1998: 63).

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<sup>25</sup> An example of this rebellious energy is found in the women slogans when claiming for a separate state: "Now listen to the voice of women -- give us our state! The women of Uttarakhand are alight to-day, The hill woman is a revolutionary torch to-day!" (quoted in Mawdsley 2000: 93-4). See also Shiva (1988).

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### Abstract (à finir)

It is sometimes thought that the sense of history has been granted to India as part of the colonial legacy, but still very much lacking in the popular expression of the local culture. Myths and stories are systematically opposed to history in the shaping of Indian culture, and history, as a way of looking at one's past and present, is thought to be only available in the form of westernized writing of it, taking the external, objective stand. Such rationality is further deemed a warrant of democracy, which is grounded on the recognition of subject as an individual responsible entity, and not on the local lore or "mythic consciousness". Using the referential literary frame of classical mythology, but extending it to the more popular and local lore of Himalayan goddesses, Mrinal Pande in a half fictional half autobiographical report on local culture, unveils the women view-point on their own self ideal as drawn from their own interpretation of the myths. The narrative intertwines English adaptations of the major classical myths from the epics and puranas, popular stories from the local lore, the family saga centred on the figure of the Grand Mother, and reports of social workers fighting for the rights of women, and succeeds in elaborating a different vision of history.

### Résumé

On tient souvent le sens de l'histoire pour un legs de la colonisation en Inde, et toujours largement absent dans la culture et les croyances populaires. On oppose les mythes et légendes folkloriques à l'histoire dans le formatage de la culture indienne. On considère que l'histoire, comme regard porté sur le passé et le présent, n'est possible que sous forme de représentation extérieure et objectivée, « à l'occidentale ». Ce modèle de rationalité passe aussi pour le garant de la démocratie, fondée sur la reconnaissance du sujet comme individu responsable et non sur les croyances locales ou la « conscience mythique ». Utilisant le cadre littéraire de la mythologie classique, qu'elle étend au folklore local de la déesse dans les contreforts de l'Himalaya, Mrinal Pande dévoile le point de vue des femmes sur leur propre idéal du moi, dans une oeuvre mi fictionnelle mi autobiographique sur la déesses et ses histoires aujourd'hui. Le récit tisse ensemble des extraits commentés de la grande mythologie indienne, les légendes populaires locales qui en dérivent, la saga familiale autour de la très haute en couleur Grand-mère, et les rapports des acteurs sociaux qui défendent le droit des femmes. Ce faisant, il présente une vision originale des rapports entre l'histoire et le mythe.