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Immanence, Abjection and Transcendence through *Satī Śakti* in Prabha Khaitan's Autobiography *Anyā se ananyā*

SUMMARY: This article aims to explore embodiment as articulated in Prabha Khaitan's autobiography *Anyā se ananyā*, inscribing it in a philosophical journey that refuses the dichotomy between Western and Indian thought. Best known as the writer who introduced French feminist existentialism to Hindi-speaking readers through her translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Prabha Khaitan is positioned as a Marwari woman, intellectual, successful businesswoman, poet, novelist, and feminist, which makes her a cosmopolitan figure. In this article I use three analytical tools: the existentialist concepts of 'immanence' and 'transcendence'—as differently proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir; Julia Kristeva's definition of 'abjection'—what does not 'respect borders, positions, rules' and 'disturbs identity, system, order;' and the *satī/śakti* notion—both as a venerated (tantric) ritual which gains its sanction from the scriptures, and as a practice written into the history of the Rajputs, crucial to the cultural politics of Calcutta Marwaris, who have been among the most vehement defenders of the *satī* worship in recent decades.

KEYWORDS: Prabha Khaitan, autobiography, abjection, transcendence, *satī*, *śakti*, embodiment

1. Introduction

This article aims to analyze Prabha Khaitan's¹ autobiography *Anyā se ananyā* ("From the Other One to the Only One," Khetān 2007 [henceforth ASA])

¹ Prabhā Khetān (1942–2008). In this article I am going to use the full name (Prabha Khaitan) when referring to the author and the first name (Prabha) when referring to the character protagonist of the autobiographical text. When the distinction is not clear-cut, I will choose the aspect that is more relevant to me.

using three tools that are drawn from the feminist critical theory, French existentialist philosophy, and Indian tantric *śākta* philosophy: the notions of abjection, transcendence/immanence, and *satī/śakti*. One might wonder why such diverse critical approaches are put together in order to read and understand a literary autobiography. Prabha Khaitan's personality is complex and multifaceted: she hailed from a Marwari family, whose economic condition had declined after Prabha's father's sudden death, and her whole life can be read as a reaction to the conventions and norms of the conservative Marwari community of Kolkata. She had a successful public persona endowed with a PhD in existentialist philosophy, literary sensibility, entrepreneurial genius, financial acumen, and a strong feminist belief. Best known as the writer who introduced French feminist existentialism to Hindi-speaking readers through her translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (Khetān 1991), Prabha Khaitan was among the early persons in India to write on existentialism. She never wrote a philosophical essay or expressed a systematic philosophical theory, but she was constantly interested in philosophy. She got an MPhil at Presidency College, and later on she enrolled in a PhD program, even if in her autobiography she downplays this event as a stratagem that her lover suggested to her in order to be able to avoid the title Miss or Mrs in front of her name, substituting it with the non-gender specific appellation 'Dr.'. Whatever the reason, she got her PhD writing a dissertation on Jean-Paul Sartre, and in the 1980s she published a scholarly essay introducing Sartre's thought (Khetān 1984) and a book on his autobiography (Khetān 1985). She later wrote another book on Albert Camus, clearly referring in the Hindi title—*Albeyar kāmū: vah pahlā ādmī*—to his posthumous unfinished autobiographical novel *Le premier homme* (Khetān 1993). Prabha Khaitan never taught in the academia, but her influence as a poet, novelist, and feminist has been extensive.

Strong and resolute in her educational and business choices, she was instead psychologically insecure, emotionally dependent, and trod the path of abjection, choosing to pursue a relationship that had no chance of being socially acceptable. After their first

acquaintance as patient and doctor, Prabha Khaitan and Gopal Krishna Saraf (Gopāl Kṛṣṇa Sarrāf, 1926–1993) developed an extra-marital relationship that lasted three decades, until the latter’s death. When they first met, she was 22, while he—a renowned optical doctor with a flourishing practice and a sound social standing, always addressed as “Dr. Saraf” in ASA—was fortyish, married with five children, and was a notorious womanizer. She was aware and critical of the ambiguity of this choice, and she declares it overtly in her autobiography.

In ASA, the narrator is female and her “Other” is male. Yet, she is the one who is always perceived as the “Other”, in a logic that poses the illegitimate lover vs. the legitimate wife, the non-conforming Marwari vs. the established community, the Marwari vs. the Bengali, and so on. Prabha’s abjection marks her disrupting role not only within the personal relationships of the Khaitan and Saraf families, but of the whole Marwari community, reinforcing the notion that Prabha Khaitan’s life narration should be read as both self-reflection and cultural analysis of her community.

Considering Prabha Khaitan’s cosmopolitan milieu and her complex cultural and philosophical positioning, I will discuss her autobiographical account focusing on the notions of abjection, transcendence, and *satī/sakti*.

2. Transcendence and immanence in *Anyā se anyā*

There are models of identity culturally available to life narrators at any particular historical moment that influence what is included and what is excluded from an autobiographical narrative. Prabha Khaitan’s autobiography is a good example of the existentialist notion that ‘I am the story I tell myself about myself’. Her perspective is avowedly existentialist. The fictional character portrayed in *Anyā se anyā* is, at least in the narrator’s eyes, a true reflection of what she reflectively sees. As I wrote in the introduction, Prabha Khaitan was among the early ones in India to write on Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus. Therefore, it is not surprising that the autobiographical works of these authors are the main model for her autobiography. Sartre is apparently the main referent of Prabha Khaitan’s existentialist philosophical orientation

and she published two books on him. Yet, even if Prabha Khaitan never published a theoretical essay on de Beauvoir, the latter's positions on situatedness and embodiment appear more influential on her than Sartre's (Consolaro 2017).

Prabha Khaitan does not write in a theoretical mode, but relies on what has been described as a "philosophy of narration" (Cavarero 1997). Her strategic position is very close to Cavarero's, as both search for a balance between two potentially conflicting tendencies of their thought: on the one hand, the reliance on the metaphysical tradition, which is deconstructed through a feminist analysis of the role it has played in legitimating patriarchal power; on the other hand, the determination to undermine this tradition, reading philosophy through the grid of sexual difference. Prabha Khaitan moves within and beyond the established rules of—European and Indian—metaphysics. And narrative combines with politics in a scenery where identity is revealed through storytelling, as it happens in love stories, female friendship, the feminist experience of self-consciousness groups, and a general inclination to tell stories.

Prabha Khaitan never makes direct use of existentialist jargon in her autobiography, but she utilizes the existentialist notion of transcendence, oscillating between Sartre's and de Beauvoir's formulation of it, so that the whole text is structured as an 'exercise in transcendence'. As is widely known, Sartre explains transcendence as the movement of surpassing facticity, thus constructing it as diametrically opposed to the fleshy immanence of the body (Sartre 2003; 1978). Simone de Beauvoir's transcendence, on the contrary, is not simply a projecting for-itself, which uses the body as an instrument: bodily immanence is necessary in order to generate the upsurge of being called 'transcendence' (Daigle and Landry 2013). Both Sartre and de Beauvoir believe that the fundamental lack at the heart of human existence tends to lead to an appropriation and possession, of objects or of people reduced to objects, in a constant effort to fill up the gap. As each human being strives to take up the position of the—active and dynamic—being for-itself in relation to the other as the—passive and inert—in-itself,

conflict is inevitable, in an endless cycle of objectification of the Other in order to assert one's own transcendence. Simone de Beauvoir sees this dynamic as deeply gendered, even actually constitutive of what gender is, as the male can assert himself as the 'Subject' just and only because the female is objectified as the 'Other', not regarded as an autonomous being (de Beauvoir 1953: 15). Moreover, most women do not dispute male sovereignty, but on the contrary, they feel a compulsion to accept their role as the Other, and often are even pleased with it. By allowing themselves to be ruled by identities imposed on them from the outside, many women are simply guilty of "mauvaise foi" or bad faith, as their decisions do not reflect who they truly are (de Beauvoir 1953: 20).

Prabha first gets aware of women's bad faith when she travels to the USA in 1966, loaded with the common idea of America as a developed, progressive society based on equality. Taking advantage of a Lions' club exchange program, she attends a training course as beautician at the Health Club in Beverly Hills. To her astonishment, she observes the rich and bored women in the beauty centre and realizes that they are male-generated portraits of themselves, always unhappy with their bodies that do not conform to a male-established and media-advertised standard of beauty (ASA 125). When she sees other women, she sees herself over there, in that object of the male Other's freedom, having lost her own autonomy to that other woman's image in the male look. She watches herself being watched (and judged) in the performance of femininity. Caught up in the mirror game, Prabha is a woman and is not a woman. Other women become her mirror-image, the self for which she must become the scene; becoming object of the male they demand that she (as subject) gives up herself and her project. She cannot/does not want to carry off that masquerade, yet she is not able to give it up: for example, she represses her feelings for a young man asking herself what Dr. Saraf would think about her (ASA 144–146). She gets to the conclusion that women in the USA are as devoid of freedom as in India—the same statement is found in de Beauvoir's American diary (de Beauvoir 1997), with reference to Europe—and she is determined not to change in order to adhere to the hegemonic culture. Later on, back in Kolkata, her work at

“Figurette”—the first Indian beauty and health club for women—makes her understand that this objectification of women’s bodies is not geographically limited, nor is it class confined: even middle-class housewives, working women, and elderly women, in bad faith, slip into seeing themselves primarily through the eyes of the others, developing a “fascist” attitude towards themselves (ASA 170–171).

Following Simone de Beauvoir’s thought as expressed in *Le deuxième sexe*, Prabha Khaitan detaches herself from the metaphysical meaning of transcendence that was present in Sartre. Prabha Khaitan refuses to understand ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence’ as, respectively, ‘body’ and ‘consciousness.’ She describes immanence as stagnation within a situation, a mode of existence marked by passivity, ease, and submission to biological fate. It is the round of largely uncreative chores—such as cooking, cleaning, bureaucratic paper work, biological functions such as giving birth—that are necessary to sustain human life or perpetuate the status quo, but are characteristically futile and unable to provide a foundational justification for existence. Transcendence, on the contrary, is associated with activity, progression, and the surpassing movement of consciousness that remains free from biological fate. It is an active mode of existence in which one attempts to surpass the present. It encompasses constructive work, activities that enable self-expression, create an enduring artefact, or in some other fashion contribute positively to the constructive endeavour of humanity. Following de Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity (de Beauvoir 1948), transcendence and immanence are not contradictories, but rather, each necessitates the other.

Although immanence is an irreducible constituent of human existence, and the immanent and transcendent aspects of living experience are inseparable, there is a fundamental difference between female and male experiences of immanence. In the next section, I argue that the difference is to be found in the fact that woman’s immanence is historically determined by abjection.

3. Alienation, abjection, and agency

In this section, I address the notion of ‘abjection’, that Kristeva defines as what does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules’, what ‘disturbs identity,

system, order' (Kristeva 1982: 4). I connect it to the ethics of ambiguity formulated by de Beauvoir, and I show how these notions are crucial in order to understand the ethics of ASA, focusing on the relationship between Prabha Khaitan and work as represented in that text.

In ASA, there is a constant stress on the necessity for the protagonist to work in order to be economically independent. She hails from a Marwari family where women were not particularly encouraged to emancipate. Her prematurely widowed mother found herself at the age of forty in charge of the large family, with two very young unmarried daughters. Being a very conservative woman "for whom being a woman is a sin, a deficient condition, it's like a group of slaves who cannot live without a master" (ASA 37; all translations from Hindi are mine, unless otherwise specified), she did not reject her role of submissive wife. But she succeeded in facing the social pressure, and became the financial manager of the household. She did not want her daughters to follow in her footsteps, and she constantly exhorted them to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Prabha states that, even if her mother deprived her of emotional closeness, she remained a positive model for her, as she "was rebellious since her birth, and I inherited her rebellious nature" (ASA 33). This recognition is reiterated in the text.

Work is a very important element for Prabha's construction of self-reliance and autonomy, at least at an economical and financial level. This is also a crucial element of disagreement between her and Dr. Saraf, as he wants to maintain the control on her world, while she struggles, albeit unsuccessfully, to remove it. Prabha initially decides to work in order to be able to stay close to Dr. Saraf, and gets a job in his clinic, with a ridiculously low salary. She lives in her mother's house, he has a family, therefore the workplace is the only space where they can freely meet, sheltered from the censorious gaze of Kolkata Marwari society. Of course this does not work, and the illicit relationship is exposed. The fault is completely placed on the girl, and she leaves for Los Angeles, firmly resolved to learn as much as she can, buy some physical training machines, and go back to India without changing into a westernized woman. In fact, back to Kolkata, Prabha

starts “Figurette”. Soon she amasses wealth, becomes a successful businesswoman, and becomes a sort of workaholic: “Figurette” becomes her shelter, as she cannot tolerate the pressure of family and society outside.

With time, she begins to question the very fact of working with women who aspire to reach an ideal that had been created for them by patriarchal society. At the same time, she feels responsible for the welfare of Dr. Saraf’s family to the point that she takes over the burden of the children’s education and of Dr. Saraf’s social life, even if she remains excluded from it.

Oddly enough, I was never afraid of financial problems because I knew I would always be able to earn enough to survive but what terrified me the most was the fear of losing Dr Saraf’s love. I could not imagine how I would ever survive if that were to happen. Therefore, I did everything that would ensure its permanence, which included pandering to his family in a craven way. In fact, I craved the acceptance of all those who despised or humiliated me. I tried so hard to convince all those who maligned me that I was as pure as they were. So perverted was my worldview then that I never really took note of those who sincerely cared for me and respected me. (Khaitan 2013: 179)¹

The picture includes also the manipulative strategies of Dr. Saraf’s wife, whose victimization allows her to maintain her status in society but also to take advantage of Prabha’s sense of guilt. Prabha is aware of the dysfunctionality of this position:

I wonder why I had put up with that life. It is not true that I did not get anything in return, but it was never enough to justify my complete and abject surrender to another person. (Khaitan 2013: 198)²

¹ *maze kī bāt to yah hai kī mujhe ārthik asurakṣā kabhī nahī gherī thī. mujhe lagtā apnī zarūrāt bhar to māī zarūr kamā lūgī par yadi jīvan meṃ pyār na rahe, yah ristā chūt jāe to māī kaise jīūgī, kahā jāūgī? unkā parivār mujhe nahī svīkār rahā thā aur māī thī kī usī parivār ko apnā banāne mē juṡī thī. jo merī chavi par kālikh milte māī unhī ko jīūne kī jī-jān se ceṣṡā karne lagtī. māīm unhī logō kī tarah hone kā prayās kartī jo mujhe burā samajhte. unhī ke sāmne mujhe daval, pavitr honā thā aur jo mujhe galat kah rahe the. jo mujhe svīkarte the, jinhē mujhse pyār thā us or māī ākh uṡhākar bhī nahī dekhnā cāh rahī thī. unṡē merī koī ruci nahī thi (ASA 174-175).*

² *āxir māī kyō nahī apne lie jīūtī? kyō? māī kyō ek parjīvī kī tarah jī rahī hū? kislīe? [...] aisā to nahī kī mujhe unse kuch bhī nahī milā, kuch to milā*

Dr. Saraf keeps on controlling her financial situation, and Prabha has a growing feeling that she is locked in a cage. In the hope of being able to travel, she turns to the leather export business for goods she wants to produce herself, something very challenging for a Marwari woman. In fact, catering, leather and liquor trading are business that Marwari traditionally do not do, and in general anything connected with animal flesh and leather is taboo, something that is left to low caste and Muslim communities (ASA 201–202). But Prabha is not willing to abide community conventions, and once again she moves on.

At this point of her life, she is ready to face her Marxian inclinations. In fact, as a student, she had been very attracted by Marxian philosophy that was popular in the intellectual circles of Bengal. She lived in Kolkata during the rise of Naxalite movement, thus witnessing the disastrous effect both of the revolutionary outburst and of the repression, and she never took active part in the political life of the city. As a working woman, Prabha still feels the pressure of society, her relation to Dr. Saraf is shaken. Yet, in doing business and in the hot, noisy and stinky environment of the mill, she feels alive, feeling a more powerful intoxication than the one produced by love. There she has to learn how to work with her staff, made of workers, proletarians, trade unionists, and she gets a direct experience of what had been until then just a fascinating theory. She understands how class-consciousness is formed, and even if she does not embrace Marxism, she positions herself as a liberal entrepreneur. If we reinterpret the distinction between transcendence and immanence as the distinction between constructive work and maintenance labour, it bears significant similarity with the distinction productive and unproductive labour by Marx. She reflects on her

thā. lekin us kuch ke sahāre zindagī bitānā sambhav nahī thā (ASA 196).

In a more literal rendering: “In the end, why am I not able to live for myself? Why do I live as a parasite? For whom? [...] It is not true that I did not get anything in return, of course I got something. But it was not possible to spend my all life with the help of just that something.” The term *parjīvī*, parasite, is used by de Beauvoir, and is the one that conveys the idea of abjection.

situated consciousness. Her rebellion has always been an individual rebellion: she has never taken part in the collective demonstration at the end of the 60s, nor in the Maoist insurgence in 70s Kolkata. How could she now, as a businesswoman, take part in a public demonstration of the working class? (ASA 260–261).

Prabha is an oppressed woman, but as a businesswoman she gets to know the male point of view. She obtains self-reliance, even if she remains in an emotionally dependent relationship to Dr. Saraf. She compares her situation to other women's conditions, and reflects on inter and intrasubjective (ethical) relations in the society she lives in. She is privileged if compared to other—poorer, less educated—women. Yet, as a third-world brown woman, she is always/already objectified by and misrepresented in intersecting systems of race, class, and gender privilege. For her, any atom of agency and self-determination has come just in the context of this objectification and alienation. Is 'alienation' the correct term to describe this kind of state? The notion of 'alienation' from a Marxian perspective, in fact, assumes a 'pure' or 'natural' state of agency as normative, versus states of corruption and disempowerment, that are precisely defined as 'alienation' and/or 'objectification.' The Marxian notion of alienation seems to suggest that it is paralyzing when the self is objectified, rendered 'other'. Using Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, together with de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity, I suggest that the abject is not—unlike the object, which is the opposite of the subject—the 'negative' of the subject, the 'not-me.' Objectified, alienated individuals are not completely lacking in agency; if analyzed through the notion of abjection, agency, choice, and freedom are only possible in this position. The experiences of oppressed groups (women, black people, Dalits, etc.) demonstrate that social marginalization and objectification are disempowering, but not absolutely disabling.

If we understand agency, freedom, and ethics in terms of the ambiguity of the abject, we refuse the essentialism of binary oppositions that is found in Marx's description of alienated labour, recognizing the non-binary, non-exclusive—indeed, ambiguous—relationship between

inside and outside, subject and object, activity and passivity. Kristeva's theory makes it clear that alienation and objectification are not meant as a reduction to, but as the foundation of agency. No pure, authentic, 'whole' state free of alienation is possible. 'Lack' or self-exile are precisely the conditions for the possibility of agency, action, and resistance upon which rests our subjectivity. Kristeva's theory of the abject shows that alienation and objectification are not prohibitive of human agency and well-being.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1997) Simone de Beauvoir, of course, does not adopt the language of abjection, but she describes in terms of ambiguity the human condition, where in each moment and in every situation one is never just either a subject/agent or an object, subjected to agency exercised by themselves, by other humans, and by forces of nature. Rather, they take up these apparently opposing roles simultaneously. In the history of philosophy, the relationship between freedom and determinism has been misrepresented by a false dichotomy between subject and object. Simone de Beauvoir claims that the possibility of individual freedom rests on the individual's dependence on and debt to others: this ambiguity is the potential for failure as well as for success that opens up to freedom. Simone de Beauvoir's 'ambiguity' seems to describe the self-exile which, in the discourse of abjection, serves as the origin of subjectivity. The origin of agency is conceived in its very failure or lack as evidence for an indeterminate boundary between subject and object. Humans must perpetually negotiate between—often conflicting—modes of existence, among the different insoluble tensions that they encounter in their subjective experience. It is true that in *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir emphasizes transcendence, but her critique of women's immanence highlights not a problem with women's bodies per se, but rather a problem with the social constructions and treatments of women's bodies. As Prabha Khaitan too states in her autobiography, a woman's body, or a brown body—and we could continue: or a disabled body, or a fat body, etc.—does not predict any single type of being-in-the-world; but social constructions of these—and other—bodies do much to considerably

affect the ways in which the world responds to them. Consequently, the social perception of one's body can significantly affect a person's ability to assume their freedom. The theories of the subject and of agency developed by Kristeva and de Beauvoir show an 'ambiguous' relationship between empowerment and objectification, self-determination and alienation—an ambiguity that is not adequately understood in Marx's critique of alienated labour and commodity fetishism.

Prabha's condition is multiply marginalized: first she picks up an underpaid job for underqualified personnel; in the USA, she works as a poor migrant in a low-paid job; she chooses socially not appreciated jobs—especially for Marwari women—such as physical training and leather processing. As a businesswoman she is not exploited, but she has to do hard physical work, in an unhealthy environment and with low caste or Muslim workers. Finally, she abjects herself when relating to Dr. Saraf's family: she assumes the role of a servant for them, with no recognition whatsoever of the tremendous efforts she is making in order to guarantee them wealth and happiness. When examining the obvious problems with this condition, we must be careful to attend to the genuine ambiguity of his situation, and avoid reducing it too much—as Marxist analyses would—on the side of either the subject or on the side of the object. Following de Beauvoir, the possibility for human freedom is linked to ambiguity. Therefore, reducing a person to thing-ness and lack is disempowering, but the same happens if we avert alienation and objectification.

Prabha's choices are undeniably circumscribed by a variety of factors: patriarchy, sexism, racism, colonialism, global economic marginalization, to name a few. As a third-world brown woman she already lives in a society, which objectifies, stereotypes, and misrepresents her: for her 'alienation' is not an abnormal condition. The choices she makes, what she thinks, her actions have all arisen in the context of these multi-layered objectifications. In a way, she was denied precisely the privilege of being 'normal,' of having 'equal' access and opportunity. However, representing her as completely objectified and alienated fails to recognize the choices she does make and the agency

she does have. In the midst of internal and external objectification she does exercise her ambiguity, her subjectivity: she chooses to tread the path of abjection and at the same time struggles to make sense of the Sartrean claim of the indestructibility of freedom even in the face of the most extreme objectification by the other. I suggest that she finds a solution to this challenge—close at the same time to existentialist thought and to her local cultural milieu—through the *satī/sakti* notion, introducing a leap to the level of collective consciousness and action.

4. *Satī/sakti*: a path to transcendence

In this final section I address the notion of freedom and situation. Using a Beauvoirian expression, the question can be formulated as: what transcendence is possible for a woman whose history has always been man made? I suggest that Prabha's apparently insane and absurd choice to live according to the *pativrātya* model outside marriage offers a solution to the issue of how it is possible to attain transcendence when being caged into immanence. Although there is no explicit philosophical discussion on this topic in the autobiography, the structure of the whole text, as suggested by the incipit referring to *satī/sakti* and by the mention of the *pativrātya* model, prompts a connection of Prabha Khaitan's discourse to Bengali *śākta* Tantrism, a path that offers an alternative and practical road to salvation by realizing the double-sided nature of existence through an intentional, regulated contact with socially disapproved persons, entities and practices.

Prabha Khaitan rejects conventional narratives of liberation and citizenship because these narratives do not accurately represent or make sense in terms of her experiences. ASA is not only the account of her personal path of abjection, but focuses on Dr. Saraf's illness and death, that are introduced at the very beginning of the text. Prabha Khaitan dramatizes the abject Otherness of intersubjective relations through the representation of the other at the end of his life, when he is potentially most distant from the self. She explores possibilities of reciprocity and confronts the other's decline and death as well as certain aspects of her own subjectivity. In a sophisticated—although

underappreciated—feminist discursive strategy of defamiliarization, she restages the traditional drama of love relationships in a highly charged, subtly provocative way.

Dr. Saraf's death indicates the final separation of lovers as well as the end of a dysfunctional relationship. It marks the end of Prabha Khaitan's account of her life as presented in ASA, but it is actually a pivotal event for her possibility to exercise transcendence and attain full freedom. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir states:

Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for masculine mediator. (de Beauvoir 1953: 641)

Equipped with Butler's argument for gender as gaps, discontinuities, and failed repetition (Butler 2007), I turn to the ideological construction of femininity in ASA. Prabha grows up in a family that offers her images of femininity—the beloved wife, devoted mother—that she immediately discards as false. She moves beyond all “parodic repetitions” (Butler 2007: 189) to embrace the new, the unknown, the risky, the unscripted, to become the mistress, “the other one.” She becomes a successful professional, but she discovers that these too are false ‘I’-s. The fact that ‘she’ does not have a ready solution is a first step toward overturning empty, pastiche roles. ‘She’ is thus the subject who becomes invested with any possibility for agency and change. In fact, all other characters in the autobiography have opted for such solutions, as shown, for example, by Dr. Saraf complacently deluded humanist, male-centric optimism; his wife role-playing and hypocritical self-abnegating piety; American and Indian women's frantic feminine mimicry. It is only once all false ‘I’-s have been dismantled and jettisoned that she can face a new and open future authentically. My thesis is that Prabha Khaitan utilizes the notion of *satī/sakti* to express this path. In this context, *satī/sakti* should be intended both as a venerated (tantric) ritual which gains its sanction from the scriptures, and as a practice written into the history of the Rajputs, crucial to the cultural politics of Calcutta Marwaris, who have been among the most vehement defenders of *Satī* worship in recent decades (Hardgrove 2001).

ASA's concluding words apparently emphasize abjection, reiterating the notion of the erasure of recognition for Prabha's existence.

At the memorial held for him, he was remembered by several prominent personalities for his many qualities. He was called one of Calcutta's most eminent citizens, a philanthropist and a brilliant doctor who was survived by his wife and children. Of a woman called Prabha Khaitan, there was no mention. (Khaitan 2013: 277)³

Dr. Saraf's demise marks the end of the relationship, but it is also the death of the Prabha who cannot imagine her life without him. This leaves a certain indeterminacy to the reader, as the text does not know/show her future, her role, or even her next move, except for the fact that, at a later date, she is the writer of the autobiography. This open ending, reread via Butler, only seems an authentic assumption of the gendered condition, which is, of course, the condition of all identity, with its risk, uncertainty and improvisation. In order to better understand who this post-Dr. Saraf Prabha of the future is, it is necessary to pay attention to the title and to the incipit of the autobiography.

ASA's incipit throws the reader off-center, being a prayer to Mother Satī, which one would not expect from the author Prabha Khaitan, a public figure renowned as a feminist. Here is a quite literal rendition of the first passage of ASA:

I bow to Satī! Mother Satī! I always kept you as an ideal, I tried to insert myself into that tradition. For me the meaning of Satī was single-minded devotion to the husband, surrender of knowledge, not looking at or even raising one's eyes towards another man. Yet, today I also bow to the remnants of that woman within me. I have already lived many days in many forms and today I am already sixty. Over half a century. (ASA 5)⁴

³ *unkī smaraṇ sabhā mẽ unhẽ kaī rūpō mẽ sambodhit aur yād kiyā gayā. kalkatte ke varīṣṭh nāgarik, samājsevī, safal dāktar... pīche patnī aur baccō ko choṛkar gae haī. prabhā khetān nāmak strī kā kahī bhī zikr nahī thā* (ASA 286).

⁴ *satī ko praṇām! satī mā! terā ādarś mere sāmne hameśā rahā, maīne khud ko usī paramparā mẽ dhālne kī kośīś kī. mere lie satī kā arth thā, pati kī ekniṣṭh bhaktī, sūcnā samarṇ, kisī parāe mard kī or ākh uṭhākar bhī nahī dekhnā. lekin āj mere bhītar kī bacī huī strī ko praṇām. bahutere rūpō mẽ bahut*

The Prabha Khaitan who writes the autobiographical account defines herself as “the remnant of that woman” (ASA 5), but she is also a newly aware and authentic ‘she,’ no longer the abject victim. She explodes the abjectified ‘she’, with whom the reader refuses all connection. Prabha appears instead as a contemporary, a friend, a sister, with whom the reader can identify. Rather than a journey toward self-awareness and discovery, Prabha’s itinerary can be read precisely as the ironization of such a journey. At this ironic level, her story demonstrates the delusion, the fiction, of such fantasmatic self-awareness. It is precisely the absence of deluded self-awareness here—the dismantling of the myth of abiding identity—that carries new hope and possibility for Prabha Khaitan, as it does for everybody in a post-Butlerian climate.

Prabha Khaitan as narrator has an apparent reluctance to identify herself as female embodied subject, as she introduces herself as “the remnants of that woman within me”; this, though, contrasts with the representations of her quests to cover new ground, both physically and mentally. Prabha Khaitan’s construction of self is founded on a denial of her gender. She writes against the female as immanence, she asserts her right to occupy the—male-identified—transcendental subject position. Once again, she seems to be closer to Simone de Beauvoir’s positions than Jean-Paul Sartre’s in this respect, as she abandons the terrain of individualist—thus idealist—morality. In ASA, Prabha claims that woman lacks the relations of equality with man necessary for a reciprocal recognition of freedoms, and is thus locked into immanence by the situation man inflicts upon her. She is therefore not necessarily responsible. Moreover, she recognizes the importance of collective consciousness and action.

din jī cukī hū̃ aur āj sāth kī ho cukī hū̃. ādhī śatābdī se ūpar. The English translation modifies the text catering to the expectations of a transnational middle-class audience, but erases the direct address to the goddess and the powerful literary and rhetorical effect of beginning a text with a prayer: “In Indian mythology, Sati—the consort of Shiva—is the embodiment of a woman who dedicated her whole life to a single man, and to him alone. I was always drawn to her and today, as I review my long life of over half a century and mentally bow to her, I also salute the remnants of the woman I once was” (Khaitan 2013: 1).

In ASA's narrative, Prabha's life story takes a fresh turn when she meets Dr. Saraf. There is a quality of indeterminacy in the representation of the 22-year-old Prabha in love, as there is no emergent sexual awareness, but we suddenly find her fully grown, defying the cultural construction of femininity that demands that women await overtures. At that time, Prabha's goal is to finish college and move on. Studying philosophy, she has discovered existentialist freedom (*liberté*), representation of identity as a perpetual forging of a self-to-the-future in the work. The beginnings of a life with Dr. Saraf are presented alongside the narrator's detailed descriptions of her first attempts at being economically independent. She has broken off with most of her old friends, effectively writing off her past. Prabha is not strictly speaking rejecting the patriarchal line, but rather merely rejecting the bourgeois ethic for an existentialist, though possibly an equally patriarchal one. From the very beginning Dr. Saraf appears as an indecisive, unstable person, a man who "changed his colours as often as a chameleon" (ASA 70) and she is aware of the fact that he is a womanizer, as well as cowardly afraid of society. It is in this context that, adhering to the *Satī* model in a brand-new way, Prabha chooses to embody the *pativrata*dharma outside of wedlock. She adheres to the *pativratya* model with no nuptial rites in a society where marriage is much more than a prescribed social convention. Marriage is an indispensable soteriological act for any woman: she is not an individual before the wedding, and it is marriage that provides a woman with an acceptable social identity in the same way that initiation into the caste does for a man. A woman's virtue (*satīva*) consists not only in sexual abstinence or self-control—as is the case for men—but mainly in proper attachment and subordination to her husband. In terms of her new logic, even if her devotion is initially borne out of romantic affection/friendship with her partner, his behaviour toward her is irrelevant to her commitment to her own moral orientation: her actions have a radical independence that are not derivative of his.

Most—feminist, western, progressive—readers would write off Prabha as a neurotic traumatized woman, denouncing *satī* as emblematic of the forms of violence perpetuated against Indian women. Instead, I want to try and make sense of this choice focusing on

satī/śakti as the very tool that allows for a shift from a completely personal level to a collective (Indian) and communal (Marwari) level. In fact, the singularity of Prabha and of her experience with Dr. Saraf hinges upon the lineage of all the women who tread the path of *satī/śakti*. Therefore, this singularity is inserted in the discourse of her community belonging, which allows her even to recover its meta-physical aspect.

Calcutta Marwaris have sustained and promoted *satī* worship in the recent decades, claiming that Rānī Satī is their lineage goddess and that *satī* is a *pativrātā* (devout wife), a role model for Marwari girls, useful to inculcate values that will make them good mothers and wives. The term *satī* is often interpreted through the English reading of it as an action ‘to commit sati’, but in India it has traditionally referred not to the deed but to the woman herself (from the Sanskrit feminine form of *sat*: good or true), who is rendered as a goddess for her super-human bravery and strength. Marwaris create ambiguity in the identity of the goddess claiming that they oppose the custom of *satī*, and that they are actually worshipping the goddess Durgā or *śakti*.⁵ As Anne Hardgrove has shown, Rānī Satī “has symbolized a community deployment of certain themes of domesticity by which particular sets of gendered social norms and domestic practices become associated with the public performance of a community identity” (Hardgrove 2001: *Sati Worship and Marwari Public Identity in India*).

Prabha Khaitan inscribes her life as *pativrātā* in her community history with a very critical approach:

This whole nonsense of the sanctity of a woman’s body is all a patriarchal myth. It is always the woman who is told to keep herself pure and the onus always placed on her shoulders, never on a man’s. Have you heard of a man committing sati or jauhar? (Khaitan 2013: 209)⁶

⁵ According to the Hindu mythology, Umā /Satī, Parvatī and Durgā are the three consorts of Śiva; though they are identified as three distinct deities, they are believed to be actually one and same (Kinsley 1998: 22–27).

⁶ *surakṣā kā āśvāsan piṭṛsattātmak mithak hai. strī kabhī surakṣit thī hī nahī. puruṣ bhī is bāt ko jāntā hai. islie satīva kā mithak saṃvardhit kartā*

At the same time, the genealogy of the Khaitan's family women—that we know as followers of the *satīpūjā*—subverts the stereotype of submissive and victimized women with no agency. Prabha's mother is defined as “rebel” at least three times in the autobiography (ASA 33, 41, 168); a widowed maternal aunt went on a pilgrimage with her accountant, and remained there for good; some paternal aunt, fed up with her alcoholic husband, planned to leave the house; another maternal cousin gave witness in court against her black marketer husband and accepted that he be sentenced to hard labour in jail, as a retaliation for his raping a seven-year old little girl (ASA 168).

Notion of *satīva* and *asatīva* are commonly connected to sexual purity. Exposing the falsity of established social norms, Prabha Khaitan stresses instead the ‘purity’ of her feelings to Dr. Saraf, emphasizing the hypocritical behaviour of Dr. Saraf himself and of all other people who are in bad faith. She laughs at Dr. Saraf's male chauvinistic inability to conceive an equal partnership, as well at his claim that a woman could never be the master in a relationship, insofar as she is the mistress of the home. Thinking of Mrs. Saraf, she observes that she was the boss in Dr. Saraf's house, but for the society both the house and the children were his, not hers; he was in total control of the family finances, and any decision was taken by him. As for herself, Prabha Khaitan admits that she had once worshipped Dr. Saraf as a divinity, and possibly even nurtured wed-related dreams. But she had gradually got annoyed by this devotion to a man, and had no illusions about the meaning of marriage. She did not love him any longer even if she still feared him (ASA 214).

I claim that the notion of *satī/sakti* allows Prabha Khaitan to solve the discrepancy between Sartre's position—indestructibility of freedom even in the face of the most extreme objectification by the other—and de Beauvoir's stress on collective consciousness and action. As is widely

rathā hai. satī-sāvitṛī rahne kā nirdeśan strī ko diyā jātā hai. par koī strī satī rah nahī pātī. hā, satīva kā āvaraṇ zarūr oṛh leī hai. yā phir ātmarakṣā ke nām par jauhar kī jvālā mẽ chalāg lagā leī hai (ASA 208).

known, Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* presents other people as only a peripheral or indirect structure of ‘my’ situation; on the contrary, for de Beauvoir others are directly involved in my own constitution of the meaning of every project. For de Beauvoir, as well as for Prabha Khaitan, the situation of an individual ‘I’ is always mediated for ‘me’ by others—hence, her argument that ‘I’ need freedoms equal to ‘mine’ in the world. However, the problem with women—and other oppressed groups—is that the social nature of their situation constitutes for them a denial of their freedom, not its confirmation: for them such a confirmation through others is impossible. Introducing the notion of *sati/sakti*, freedom becomes a relational notion, a personal/collective experience, connected also to the metaphysical aspect of Śaktism, that is relevant in Bengal (McDaniel 2007).

On the mythical level, before the dramatic destruction of her body, Sati’s rage is directed at her own husband and leads to the epiphany of ten ‘great revelations or manifestations,’ the Mahāvidyās (Kinsley 1997).⁷ They are terrifying and dangerous powers. They embody habits, attributes, or identities usually considered repulsive or socially subversive, such as violence and death, prohibited and despised things, marginal social roles: in a word, they are abjected figures. None of them is a spouse or a wife, they are definitely not—in de Beauvoir’s words—*jeunes filles rangées*. They are dramatically marginalized, impure, socially subversive characters, perceived as a menace to the established social order. They challenge the social normative mundane commodities, security, respect, honour. Yet, in *śākta* tantric belief,⁸ these ‘antimodels’ have a tremendous liberating potential, insofar as they grant their devotees liberation through the very things that are prohibited by the established social order. In fact, in order to get a direct encounter with a renovating and liberating spirituality, it is necessary

⁷ The myth is recounted as part of the story of Dakṣa’s sacrifice. The accounts are found in *Bṛhadharmapurāṇa*, *Madhyakhaṇḍa* 6.73–133, and *Mahābhāgavatapurāṇa* 8.45–9.82.

⁸ Most Hindu tantric *saṃpradāy* are in fact *śākta-śaiva*, worshipping the Goddess as a more accessible form of Śiva than the god himself (Gupta 1979: 5–7).

to widen one's consciousness beyond conventionally accepted norms, to break off social roles and expectations, to free oneself from the oppression of socially acceptable or predictable rules of purity and impurity, proper and improper, good and bad, class and cast, and so on.

Women's roles in Bengal *śākta* tantric milieus differ quite strongly from the roles described in tantric texts, that is women as incarnations as goddesses, as ritual consorts, and as gurus (McDaniel 2007: 170). Female *śākta tāntrikā*-s are often celibate, and insistently so. For tantric wives who remain in the household, instead, the religious goals tend to be devotion and obedience to husband and guru and desire of union with Śakti. Tantric Śaktism for them is not rebellious, but rather implies following *strīdharma*, for Tantra is the wish of her husband and guru, and it is a way to serve them (McDaniel 2007: 169). Often these female practitioners of tantric Śaktism have attained great religious heights, but most prefer to remain inconspicuous, and people do not know about them. "In West Bengali society, tantric spiritual practices may sacralize a woman's life and actions, or cause her to be rejected by the community, depending on the type of ritual involved" (McDaniel 2007: 174). This complicates western assumptions about women and tantric ritual, particularly sexual ritual.

The key aspect of Śaktism that enters in Prabha Khaitan's discourse is its reversal of all social and moral conventions in the name of a superior freedom. Prabha's loyalty and attachment to Dr. Saraf in a non-wedded relationship makes her an 'antimodel' and her marginalization is a constant feature of ASA:

I was completely alone. So lonely that I could not become anybody's role model. No young woman would want to become like me... Every success I achieved was shattered into pieces in front of social boycott, every personal victory had its sheen rubbed away. Actually, my independence was a poisoned freedom, as it brought in its wake tension and complications, instead of relief and joy. (ASA 174)⁹

⁹ *māi akelī thī, itnī akelī ki māi kisī kā rol māḍel nahī ban sakī. koī larīkī mere jaise nahī honā cāhī thī... merī tamām safaltāē sāmājjik kasauī*

It is precisely social antimodels who can effectively dislocate an individual. Antimodels are what inherently disturb conventional identity and cultural concepts. They are very close to Kristeva's idea of the abject as what is the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. Reading Prabha's story, the story of a marginalized young woman, abjected in a forbidden relationship, we may acquire a new and refreshing perspective on the cage of respectability and predictability.

The *tantrikā*, like the abject, is rejected by social reason, insofar as it threatens the communal consensus that underpins a social order. Her place is one where boundaries begin to break down, where we are confronted with an archaic space before such linguistic binaries as self/other or subject/object. In the light of this interpretation, Prabha's abjection as an anti-conventional tantric *pativratā* reinforces her disrupting role not only within the personal relationships of the Khaitan and Saraf families, but of the whole Marwari community, bolstering the notion that Prabha Khaitan's life narration should be read both as self-reflection and cultural analysis of her community.

A final ambiguity is in the very choice to write an autobiography defining oneself as an anti-model: at the same time as Prabha Khaitan states this, her life and her whole career remain as 'representative'. Prabha Khaitan writes for posterity and this autobiography/autothanatography (Miller 1994: 12) should be literally read as a testament, "a statement of what one bequeaths, whether it be one's property, one's works, one's beliefs or, of course, in the last resort one's life down for others. [...T] his ancient genre confirms a mythical status posthumously conferred, but seen as conferred on a career rather than a person" (Maclean 1994: 124). In her autobiographical account, the writer's lasting impression left to the reader in the end is as role model for others: a *śākta* existentialist ambiguous role model.

par pachār khāne lagī. sārī upalandhiyā apnī camak kho deī. ataḥ merī svatantratā ek zahrīlī svatantratā thī. jahā tanāv adhik thā, kabhī na khulnevālī gānthē thī.

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