

**Of veils and mourning:  
Fazal Sheikh's widowed images**

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For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

*We have been turned away from the face, sometimes through the very image of the face, one that is meant to convey the inhuman, the already dead, that which is not precariousness and cannot, therefore, be killed; this is the face that we are nevertheless asked to kill, as if ridding the world of this face would return us to the human rather than consummate our inhumanity. One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake.... We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense.*

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*<sup>1</sup>

I.



Neela Dey ("Sapphire") Vrindavan, India

Each time it is a story of what the eye can see and what it cannot—of what the camera can capture and of what eludes it. To say this, however, is simply to say that our experience of these photographs is always an experience of the eye—of an eye that seeks to see where it does not see, where it no longer sees, or where it does not yet see. At every moment, we are asked to respond to a certain play of light and darkness—the light and darkness without which the eye would have no story—and we respond to the muteness of this play by inventing stories, by relating each of these shifting images to several possible narratives. We will never know, however, if the stories we tell—about what we think we see as we look—will ever touch or engage the images before us.<sup>2</sup>

But what happens when—as is so often the case in the images that compose Fazal Sheikh's remarkable series of photographs, *Moksha*—a photograph gives the experience of the eye over to blindness, when it leads the line of our sight

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, New York, Verso, 2004, pp. 150-51.

<sup>2</sup> This essay is a companion piece to "Palm Reading: Fazal Sheikh's Handbook of Death." It stages its relation to this earlier essay by citing (in Benjaminian mode, "without citation marks") certain passages from

it, as in these opening paragraphs. In this way, it seeks to suggest the way in which my reading of Sheikh's *Moksha* project is mediated by my earlier encounters with his work. As I will suggest in my reading of *Moksha*, Sheikh suggests that any encounter—for example, our encounter with his images of Vrindavan widows—is

always mediated and therefore never immediate, transparent or direct.

toward a light or shadow that prevents us from seeing? What happens when our eyes meet what they cannot see, or when they encounter what cannot be encountered? What might this experience of blindness and shadows have to do with what makes photography photography? In what way do these images tell us that sight is essentially linked to an experience of mourning, an experience of mourning that mourns not only experience but sight itself? As Sheikh would have it, as soon as a technology of the image exists, sight is already touched by the night. It is inscribed in a body whose secrets belong to the night. It radiates a light of the night. It tells us that the night falls on us. “But even if it were not to fall on us, we already are in the night,” Derrida explains, “as soon as we are captured by optical instruments that have no need for the light of day. We are already ghosts. . . . In the nocturnal space in which this image of us, this picture we are in the process of having ‘taken,’ is described, it is already night. Moreover, because we know that, once taken, once captured, such an image can be reproduced in our absence, because we know this already, we already know that we are haunted by a future that bears our death. Our disappearance is already there.”<sup>3</sup>

## II.

What does it mean to respond to an image or a photograph? What would it mean to respond to the claims an image or photograph makes on us? How can we respond, for example, to the images and histories inscribed within the photographs that compose Fazal Sheikh’s *Moksha*, the first part of his exhibition, *Beloved Daughters*? How can we begin to read them? How might we give meaning to the details our eyes

pass or pause over as they wander across the photograph’s surface? They seem to require a kind of training of the eye—a training that would teach the eye to pay attention not only to the force and logic of each detail but also to the way in which each photograph appears as a constellation of several histories, even as it remains linked to an absolutely singular event, and therefore also to a particular moment and site. What the photographs in fact ask us to think about is the relation between these several histories and the set of traces that has been preserved for us by Sheikh’s camera. The photographs belong to a series of photographs taken by Sheikh in the first few months of 2004 in the holy city of Vrindavan, also known as the “city of widows.” They must therefore be read in relation to the history of the city (and, in particular, the sacred history of the city, a history that includes its being the childhood playground of Krishna), but also in relation to the way in which, “as more temples and shrines were built in Krishna’s name, the city became the holy place of refuge for India’s thousands of dispossessed widows,” who, worshipping Krishna, “meditate on his name at the end of their lives in the hope of achieving *moksha* [salvation or heaven], and joining him forever.”<sup>4</sup> As part of Sheikh’s effort to expose the plight and circumstances of the widows’ lives, the photographs also belong to his long-standing focus on the rights of displaced and dispossessed populations, from his efforts within the last fourteen years to document and record the mass phenomena of the refugee—in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also in Somalia, Kenya, Brazil, and beyond—to his more recent projects on the systemic oppression, displacement, and discrimination against women in India, *Moksha* and *Ladli*.

In each instance, Sheikh’s photographs seek to evoke and counter what Walter Benjamin famously referred to as the

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Échographies de la télévision. Entretiens filmés*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1996, p. 131

<sup>4</sup> Fazal Sheikh, “Across the Waters of Sorrow: The Widows of Vrindavan”, in *Moksha*, Göttingen, Steidl, 2005, p. 258. There are approximately forty million widows in India and roughly twenty thousand widows at any given time in Vrindavan, many (although by no means

all) from West Bengal. Even though the Hindu Succession Act of 1969 made women eligible to inherit equally with men and some individual states have legislated equality provisions into inheritance laws, in actual practice, widows are often deprived of their legal rights. Local interpretation of caste customs, for example, can determine whether or not a widow will be granted

some permanent or temporary share of the family’s land or property and, because of this, her rights are often violated. Indeed, the common restrictions on property, residence, remarriage and employment destine most widows to a life of economic, social and even physical distress. Moreover, because the widows who move to Vrindavan come from different caste and economic

backgrounds, their living conditions there differ greatly, with some living in government homes, but most living in tiny alcoves in the streets or in small old-age homes to be found throughout the town. What needs to be explored, however, is the extent to which their decision to come to Vrindavan, however pressed they might have been, and for often heterogeneous reasons—these

“tradition of the oppressed”<sup>5</sup>—a tradition composed of the silence of the displaced and marginalised, and the inability to give voice to the traumas of the dispossessed. Like Benjamin, Sheikh seeks to enable those whom violence has deprived of expression to articulate their claim to justice, and, in so doing, to make a claim on us that may compel us to meet our responsibility toward them. If his photographs begin in a kind of muteness, then, they also convey a silence that at times screams to the heavens, a silence that—in presenting us the traces of violence, deprivation, oppression, and effacement in relation to which these widows exist—attests to the necessity and responsibility of producing photographs, but also of making them speak. What is therefore at stake is not only the possibility of casting a light on those whom history has sought to reduce to silence, whom history has deprived of a voice and a face but also the chance that the inexpressibility of the traumas they have experienced can be given expression. What is implied here is that a photograph can never be thought solely in terms of what is printed on photographic paper: it always bears the traces of a photographic event and, if we are obliged to reconstruct this event, this act of reconstruction requires more than simply identifying what is exhibited in the photograph. It requires an act of engagement, an act of interpretation, which responds to the several histories that form its conditions. This is perhaps especially the case when the relation between what is visible and what is invisible is no longer certain; for we may be viewing a woman who has suffered some form of injury, a woman who, because of this injury, now lives as if, even in life, she were already dead. We know, for example, that numerous visual and textual expressions might be able to testify to the woman’s injuries, even while still enabling the most visible signs of the trauma

to remain unseen: in the world of the photograph, what is visible always threatens to become invisible and what is presently invisible is what needs to be made visible.<sup>6</sup> To read a photograph therefore would mean to give an account of the separate histories and contexts sealed within it, to respond to the innumerable experiences commemorated, displaced, and ciphered by it, to seek to reconstruct the circumstances in which it was produced, or better, of those it names, codes, disguises or dates on its surface, circumstances that would include the trauma of violence and loss, of dispossession and death. But if the circumstances or contexts in which a photograph is produced can never be fully given (since they are interwoven within an entire network of historical and social relations), how can we respond to what remains invisible, to what can never be seen directly within the images? If the structure of an image is defined in relation to what remains unseen, this withholding and withdrawing structure prevents us from experiencing the image in its entirety, or, to be more precise, encourages us to recognise that the image, bearing as it always does several memories at once, is never closed. It perhaps also tells us—if it can tell us anything at all—that it is in relation to this invisibility, to this departure from sense and understanding, that our capacity to bear witness may indeed begin to take place.

### III.

Let us return to these women, or at least to the question of what it might mean to see them. Sheikh seeks to present to us with a series of images of Indian women who have been widowed, but another characteristic distinguishes them even

include the nature of the relations they have or do not have with their families, their age, their economic status (it should be noted, however, that many upper-caste widows, who could be supported by their relatives, are also reduced to poverty because they are cast out of the household), and the fact that, at times, rural widows are more likely to remarry than widows from higher castes,

since they are more strictly bound to celibacy—truly offers them the solace they come to secure. Sheikh provides a measure of this solace by including passages from his interviews of several of the widows he photographed during his stay in Vrindavan.

<sup>5</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” (trans. Harry Zohn), in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938–1940*, ed.

Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 392.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted on this point to Ariella Azoulay’s delineation of what she calls “the civil contract of photography,” a contract that, for her, would take into account all of the participants in the photographic act, “camera, photographer, photographed subject and

spectator” and would approach “the photograph (and its meaning) as an unintentional effect of the encounter between all of them.” “None of these,” she adds, “have the capacity to seal off this effect and determine its sole meaning,” see Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York, Zone Books, 2008, p. 23.

more: they are widows who live in Vrindavan. Abandoning what was left of their lives after the death of their husbands, they have come to this holy city to overcome the cycle of reincarnation, to be converted into brides of Krishna, and, in this way, to achieve *moksha* and salvation. Yet before he allows us to see these widows, Sheikh evokes the iconography of Krishna and his women. Recalling the story that justifies their presence in Vrindavan, these images delay our encounter with them: because we should not rush here, because we should not imagine ourselves able to view these women directly, without the many mediations that we must pass through, and which Sheikh places between these women and our eyes. As in the “anatomy lesson” doctors encounter in a book before they confront the naked body on the dissection table, here the photographer suggests that we cannot understand the images that follow without first encountering and reading the images that precede them. We must first comprehend the story (necessarily a visual story) that serves as a lens through which to read the conjunction of contradictions and ambivalences that we will see in each of the photographed women: women marked by loss but also by the utopia of an encounter with Krishna, women who have been displaced, dispossessed, and expelled from the world, but who are in Vrindavan because they believe they are at the threshold of Heaven.

Sheikh’s work distances itself from ethnographic or documentary photography at the very moment in which he destroys the fictions that sustain ethnography: first, the idea that a direct encounter between the camera and the photographic subject is possible, and, second, the fiction that the photographic mediation disappears in order to facilitate a direct encounter between our eyes and what the image shows us. Our encounter with the widows of Vrindavan



Parchment with drawings of Krishna and his life with the *gopis* made by a Bengali widow Vrindavan, India



Parchment with drawings of Krishna and his life with the *gopis* made by a Bengali widow Vrindavan, India



Night passageway Vrindavan, India

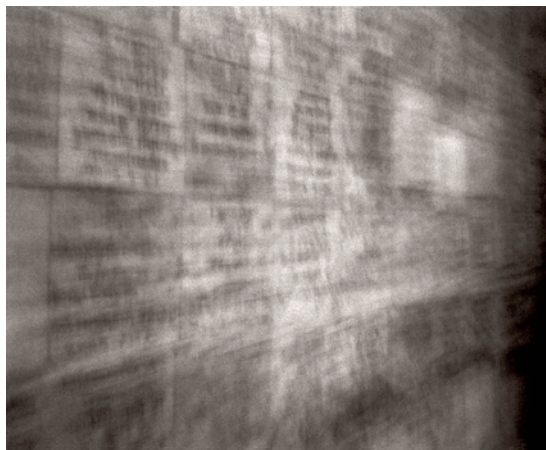
is delayed, not only by the iconographic images of Krishna that open the book but also because Sheikh emphasizes the entry into the city. To enter *moksha*, he seems to suggest, is to enter the imagery that sustains the city, to enter the city and the stories and legends that belong to its very representation. Indeed, we cannot see the widows without passing through a series of mediations: we must look at them with eyes that bear the iconography of Krishna, the images of utopia, or the religious beliefs that promise happiness and Heaven, and that view the city in which they now live. We must look at them knowing that we are not only looking at a particular subject, a woman, an Indian woman, a widowed, Hindu woman. Sheikh appears to suggest that to view the other is nearly impossible, since we must always look at her through something else, through the images that precede her, through the stories that justify her presence here, and even at the very moment in which the photograph is taken.

The person who wishes to encounter these women should follow the path taken by Sheikh's camera: to go in search of them and to enter the city, to trace the path of these women who, after the loss they have experienced, seek shelter and refuge in this holy city: we must enter this city in the same way that they have been promised an entry into Heaven, because *moksha* is achieved by passing "across the waters of sorrow to the farthest shore from darkness." And this is also the entry into Moksha, Sheikh's book. It is necessary to cross the waters, to pass through the sorrow and to arrive on the other side of darkness. After the images of Krishna—the images that tell us why these women have made their journey into this holy city—we enter the city, without being able to see anything clearly. Unlike the other images, these images are blurred, unclear, uncertain. They are dominated

by obscurity; it is difficult to discern what is in front of us. The images emphasise the relation between light and obscurity, between seeing and not seeing. We are unable to see clearly, we do not know what we are seeing: rather than select a fragment of reality for us, it is as if the camera had taken these pictures by itself. At moments it would seem that it is a question of a river, and that we perhaps are crossing the waters that will carry us, too, to moksha; at other moments it would seem that we can make out a flight of steps, perhaps a door, perhaps a column. We are confronted with an urban landscape, with an entry into a city that is deliberately like a river, like the waters that separate the sorrow and darkness of the world in order to transport us into light. After crossing this river that is also a city, after looking at a city that is also a river, we finally can look at Sheikh's widows. And yet, the first illumined image, the first high-definition image, as it were, the first portrait of this book of portraits, is the image of a woman whose identity is concealed. We can only see her from behind, hidden by a shawl that covers her body, and that seems to bind her, to hold her tightly, to keep her in place. We will return to this later—to the many widows who remain unseen by us—but let us dwell a little longer in this passage, in this suspended moment created by Sheikh, in this very delay, in this ensemble of images that we should see before seeing this entirely covered subject. In order to see, he suggests, we must pass through darkness; to see an image we must open our eyes, but, much more importantly, we must keep them closed first. It is not so much that darkness is a condition of light, but rather that the shadow—the blurred and uncertain vision—is a condition of sight. Sheikh reinforces this in his description of his initial entry into Vrindavan: “our journey had been slowed by intermittent bands of mist and as we



Yamuna Dasi (“Servant of Yamuna”) Vrindavan, India



Night passageway with commemorative plaques Vrindavan, India

approached the town a dense pall of fog reduced our visibility to only a few feet... Though it was only a few hours since we had left Delhi, it felt as if we had descended through time to another era. Late that night, walking through the town still shrouded in fog... I stumbled along the passageways... Next morning I woke very early to be out on the streets at what Hindus refer to as one of the 'threshold' times—the moments after sunset and just before dawn. In this mysterious twilight the streets of Vrindavan are like an empty stage, from which the boy-god Krishna and his gopis have only just retired."<sup>7</sup> Within this uncertain twilight zone, what is to be seen cannot be seen, unless we can begin to see that this uncertainty and indeterminacy is precisely the point. Just as we cannot see the city clearly or directly, we can never see the widows directly either, since they must be seen through eyes touched by at least the history of Krishna, the history of Vrindavan as a sacred city and refuge for widows, and through the apparatus of infinite mediation that we call "photography." This is why Sheikh's work is, before anything else, a reflection on the conditions of possibility of the gaze in general and on the conditions of possibility of the gaze of the camera in particular. But what are the conditions for seeing? Under what conditions can we see the other or the other's image? Or better yet: under what conditions can we see the other as what she necessarily is: an image, a construction of the gaze or of the camera that permanently prevents us from viewing her directly?

What Sheikh suggests here is that the experience of the photograph is always associated with a kind of delay or belatedness, and not only with the interval of time necessary for memory to activate the life arrested and sealed within it. No matter how instantaneous the action of a camera might be, there is always some measure of delay, always some

interval of time, between the click of the camera and the taking of a photograph. This delay structures the photograph that, emerging with the click of the shutter, corresponds to the transit between light and darkness, to the duration that arrests what we call an image, even if this image can only become a photograph later, when it is developed. This is why the delay that Sheikh inserts into the beginning of his book—into the space and time between the moment in which we open it and the moment in which we first see the widows—becomes not only an allegorical meditation on the delay built into every photograph, but also a first suggestion that sight can only take place through a series of mediations. Our eye requires these mediations in order to see, even if they also prevent us from ever seeing what is before us directly and in all its immediacy.<sup>8</sup> How are we to understand the vertigo of this series, and especially when it invites a kind of endless self-reflexivity? And, indeed, Sheikh's photographs are extremely self-reflective. They often are traversed by different mirror effects: from the images cast upon reflective surfaces to the mirrors in which objects and persons are reflected to the several images that cite or replicate other images, even if at times in displaced forms, to various modes of representation represented within the images (writing, photographs, statues, stones with inscriptions, buildings, posters, portraits within various kinds of frames, signs on windows or walls, dioramas, and coins with writing and images on them). These reflections operate in his photographs as a means of photographing photography itself. These are photographs, in other words, that tell us something about photography and not only because, within a photograph, *everything is representation*.

When Sheikh's preliminary photographs lure us into their world, when they invite us to pass through the threshold of

<sup>7</sup> Fazal Sheikh, "Across the Waters of Sorrow: The Widows of Vrindavan," op. cit. p. 257.

<sup>8</sup> As Yates McKee has noted, in a discussion on the role and place of technological resources in NGOs, and of the mediated character of vision in general, "[...] if vision acquires an inflated metaphorical privilege because

of the centrality of technologies such as cameras, camcorders, television, satellites, the Internet and Powerpoint presentations in contemporary politics, it is only insofar as they prevent vision from ever simply being itself. It is not that these technologies distort the immediacy typically associated with the optical faculty; rather, they magnify and

exacerbate the general point that every visual artefact and experience is always already marked by an unforeseeably mediated network of histories, interpretations and contexts that, strictly speaking, are not visually evident as such. In this sense, every image is a kind of text that requires both looking and reading, regardless of whether an image

contains or is accompanied by text in the narrow sense of the word." See McKee, "Eyes and Ears': Aesthetics, Visual Culture and the Claims of Nongovernmental politics", in *Nongovernmental Politics* (ed. Michel Feher with Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee), New York, Zone Books, 2007, p. 330.

his book in order to display their capacity to preserve the broken pieces of the past, they also suggest the ways in which these memories are held in reserve. Sometimes they are put away, sometimes forgotten, until, one day, we happen upon them, and view them under the falling and failing light of our own eyes, or, to be more precise, amidst the shadows and recesses of our memory's eye. Drawing us into their space, these photographs tell us that, in order to see them from the outside, we must already—or still—be in them. To bring the truth about the photograph to light, we must be ready to bring it into the light of the photograph. To say this, however, is to say that we can only speak about the photograph from its threshold. And the photograph is itself perhaps nothing other than a threshold, like the camera's shutter, an opening and a closing. This is why the photographs that compose *Moksha* are so often traversed by thresholds and passages, doors and windows, streets and alleys, but also by cloth of different kinds that serves as the threshold between what we can see and what we cannot.

#### IV.

In Pankaj Butalia's 1993 documentary on the widows of Vrindavan, also entitled *Moksha*, we hear the voice of an unseen woman reciting the lines of a poem written by Butalia himself and fragmented across the length of the film, punctuating it at key moments. The first fragment we hear is recited during the film's opening scene, as we watch a woman going downriver in a boat, alone and in white, and seated with her back to the viewer. As we watch the woman crossing the waters, we hear the unseen woman say: "Conjure up time / mirror the ancient story / for the past is



Commemorative plaques Vrindavan, India

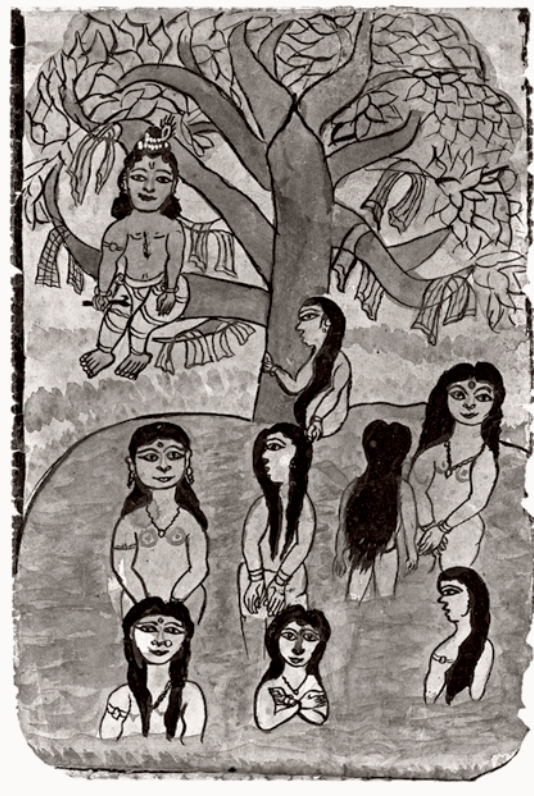


Passageway at dawn Vrindavan, India



Dawn along the Yamuna River Vrindavan, India





Parchment with drawings of Krishna and his life with the *gopis* made by a Bengali widow Vrindavan, India



Icon of Krishna's widow Vrindavan, India

here / searching / the streets mingled with dust / concentrated ash and sorrow in by-lanes strewn / spewed / like bones from marrow." She later adds the command and question: "Inscribe, O Mother / with the ink of poverty / this story of yours etched so long ago. / What could you write that was not for you written?" The film opens with an evocation of the journey "across the waters of sorrow to the farthest shore from darkness," and then, like Sheikh, it suggests that, if we are to understand the widows of Vrindavan, we must link the city and its dispossessed inhabitants to the "ancient story" of Krishna, which survives not only in the lives of the widows—inscribed as they are within it—but also in the streets and by-lanes of the city itself. Suggesting that the widows are following a script they had inherited, the disembodied voice asks us to read the relation between this ancient script and the lives of these impoverished and dispossessed women.<sup>9</sup>

While there are innumerable versions of the Krishna story, circulated in sacred poems as well as in folkloric traditions, one of the most important sources for the history of Krishna is the *Bhagavata-Purana*, a collection of narratives, genealogies, epic stories, prayers and hymns of praise. The celebrated Sanskrit work—probably produced in South India between the seventh and tenth centuries—was central to medieval devotional theism and to Krishnaism in particular. What is singular about the work—and something that is entirely pertinent to the reading I wish to pursue here—is that it is composed of a series of narratives that are told to someone who is about to die.<sup>10</sup> Having been cursed to die in seven days, King Parikshit spends his last days listening to the sage Suka tell him what a person on the point of death should hear, chant and remember: Krishna's names, personal form and stories. Organised around a meditation on death

<sup>9</sup> Emphasising the relation between the embrace of this ancient script and the difficulties of a life that, at the same time, is "chosen" by the widows, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests—in reference to Butalia's film in particular—that the widows cannot merely be seen as victims. As she puts it, "It is too easy to have a politically correct interpretation of these widows, although the denunciation of the predatory male establishment of moneylenders and petty religion-mongers

is altogether apt. [...] These women, who would seem decrepit to the merely sophisticated eye, speak with grace, confidence and authority, not as victims. [...] They have come to Vrindavan for freedom, such as it is. [...] As old-age homes for [...] widowed female relatives, these dormitories are harsh indeed. But they are transformed into a space of choice and performance for the gift for theatre of these near-destitute widows, ready to inhabit the *bhakti* [devotional]

scripts that are thrust upon them. There is everything to denounce in a socioeconomic sex-gender system that will permit this. But the women cannot be seen as victims, and the theatre of *bhakti* cannot be seen as orthodox pure and simple. The contrast between the sentimental voiceover of the documentary and the dry power of the women is itself an interpretable text." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Moving Devi," in *Cultural Critique*, 47, 2001, pp. 154-155.

<sup>10</sup> As far as I know, the most extensive and elaborate treatment of this structure—of this series of narratives organised around several kinds of death—can be found in E. H. Rick Jarow's *Tales for the Dying: The Death Narrative of the Bhagavata-Purana*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2003. Much of my discussion of this collection of narratives is indebted to Jarow's own analysis and, at certain moments, I in fact incorporate a kind of

and dying, then, the *Bhagavata* seeks to think about how we should regard death, and about the relations among death, loss and love.

The composition of the *Bhagavata* is itself framed by death, since it takes its point of departure from the death of Krishna, and therefore begins at the very moment in which an era is passing away. This background of death is essentially linked to the myth of the text's composition and to how the *Bhagavata* views itself in relationship to dying and to its own narrative movement. It is a narrative organised around death and composed of death, and of a death that begins with birth and is inseparable from birth. The portrayal of death in the *Purana* is so pervasive that nothing or no one is untouched by it. Beyond its many scenes of literal death, the *Bhagavata* is filled with figurative deaths, all of which confirm separation as a major element in both Indian literature and religion. These instances of separation emphasise the anguish that ensues from being apart from one's beloved or from one's own nature. This separation is often described as more agonising than "mere death," and it includes the distance between the human and the divine as well as the separation from loved ones. As E. H. Rick Jarow has noted, "[f]athers are constantly losing sons, wives lose husbands, parents lose children, and lovers lose their beloved. The entire *Purana* may be read as a sustained meditation on loss, and this perhaps is its force." Rather than seeking to avoid loss, the *Bhagavata* not only celebrates it but also makes it a catalyst of transformation. This is most clearly legible in the climactic story of Krishna and the cowherd women whom he seduces along the river, the *gopis* in relation to which the poem explores the relations between love and loss, and the human and the divine. In the story, the *gopis* had prayed to

the goddess Katyayani that Krishna would become their husband, and their prayers were answered when, after stealing their clothes while they were bathing in the river, Krishna asks them to come out of the river and approach him if they want their garments returned. Seeing the *gopis* without clothes, he is said to have become their husband. All of this takes place within a scene in which ordinary time and space do not apply, since it suggests that, within this particular night, there already are many nights. That the story of Krishna and the *gopis* leads to darkness (we can recall here that "Krishna" literally means "dark" or "black") brings us back to the story of Krishna's birth, a story that is entirely a photographic one.

As we learn in an earlier *Bhagavata* narrative, Krishna's birth is predicted by a star,<sup>11</sup> and, as we know, the history of photography (from Baudelaire to Valery to Proust to Benjamin to Kracauer and to Barthes) can be said to begin with the interpretation of stars.<sup>12</sup> Within this photographic context, then, Krishna is born on a moonless night at midnight in the Mathura prison and under the threat of execution.<sup>13</sup> He is born in a photographic space—in a dark room, a kind of *camera obscura*—and appears in his majestic four-armed form. The only mortal who witnesses his birth begs him to assume a more customary appearance and, in a flash, the blinding light of divinity both strikes and blackens Krishna, who now appears as an infant. Sheikh hints at this link between Krishna and the realm of photography in the remarkable picture of an imagistic shrine to the little Krishna. Surrounded by darkness, inserted into and emerging from out of this photographic space, his representation seems situated within the aperture of a camera, but also within a kind of womblike environment. That mothers are always another name for photography—like the camera,

miniaturised photograph-in-prose of this analysis. In the same way that Sheikh suggests that our encounter with the Vrindavan widows is mediated by, among other things, the story of Krishna, my own reading of the *Bhagavata-Purana* has been mediated by Jarow's.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, at the time of Krishna's birth, "the constellations and the stars were all favourable." See *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God* (Srimad

*Bhagavata Purana Book X*), (trans. Edwin F. Bryant) New York, Penguin, 2003, p. 19. All further references to Book X of the *Bhagavata* are to this edition and will be referenced parenthetically within the essay by page number, and then: X, chapter number, verse number.

<sup>12</sup> I have made this argument in my *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton UP, 1997), pp. 26-41.

<sup>13</sup> Krishna was born in the prison at Mathura, where his parents Devaki and Vasudeva were being held by Devaki's brother, King Kamsa. They had been imprisoned because their eighth son, Krishna, was prophesied to kill his maternal uncle, King Hamsa. The King fully intended to kill the infant upon his birth, but when Krishna was born, the prison guards fell asleep and the doors of the prison magically opened. Vasudeva walked out of the prison and took Krishna

across the Yamuna River to Gokul, where he was cared for by his foster parents, Nanda and Yasoda, in Vrindavan, just fifteen kilometres from Mathura.



Parchment with drawings of Krishna and his life with the *gopis* made by a Bengali widow Vrindavan, India

they, too, are a means of reproduction—suggests that the little Krishna, this little offspring of a principle of reproduction, will himself become a principle of reproduction, something that is confirmed when he is presented as a force of multiplication when he multiplies himself to be available with equal intimacy to every *gopi* he summons.<sup>14</sup> A force of reproduction, he also becomes a mechanism for the production of distance and separation when he leaves the *gopis* behind. Like the photograph, which is always organised around the absence of the photographed, Krishna is another name for mourning, if not for photography itself. Indeed, it is perhaps no coincidence that the widows whom Sheikh photographs believe, as he tells us in the text that accompanies *Moksha*, that his photographs will be an offering to Krishna.<sup>15</sup>

Returning to the story of Krishna and the *gopis*, the next verse begins with the first of many references to the moon. Setting up the theme of separation and return, the rising moon is compared to the long-awaited sight of a loved one. As Krishna tells the cowherd girls, “Love for me comes from hearing me... meditating on me, and reciting my glories, not from physical proximity. Therefore, please return to your homes” (127: X.29.27). Suggesting that the strongest experience of the absolute occurs through parting, Krishna disappears, and, in doing so, inaugurates the great separation. Of all the words that could have been used for this disappearance, the one chosen in the *Bhagavata* suggests “merging into” or, more literally, to “place within”: *antar-dha*.<sup>16</sup> In other words, Krishna does not really go anywhere, since he inhabits everything and everyone. The experience of loss instead becomes the agent of transformation. The disappearance is sudden, and it overwhelms the cowherd women. They begin to exhibit

<sup>14</sup> If we accept Rimbaud’s suggestion that the entry into a photographic space always corresponds to the “advent of [the self] as an other,” which always implies a transformed version of our “self,” then Krishna’s appearance as one of Vishnu’s ten avatars—his appearance as a transformed double of Vishnu—confirms his photographic status.

<sup>15</sup> As Sheikh notes, “On my last evening visit to the ashram the widows asked why I had never photographed the altar in the temple. In fact, it was because I felt too conspicuous standing in the middle of the mass of chanting women. But at their request I set up my camera in the central aisle and began to work. The widows’ chanting quickened and some of the

women let out ululations of a kind I’d never heard before. I found out later that this was because they considered the making of the photographs as an offering to Krishna.” See Fazal Sheikh, *Moksha*, op. cit. p. 274.

<sup>16</sup> On this point, see E.H. Rick Jarow, *Tales for the Dying*, op. cit. p. 105.

various symptoms and degrees of loss, the first being the imitation of his activities. Becoming absorbed with him, the *gopis* begin to identify with him and declare, “I am He.” The verse reads as follows: “When *Bhagavan* suddenly vanished, the women . . . were filled with remorse at his disappearance.../ Intoxicated by the pleasing gestures, playfulness and words, as well as by the quivering glances, smiles of love and movements of Krishna . . . their minds were overwhelmed. They acted out each of those behaviours, their hearts [dedicated] to him. / Those beloved women were so bewildered by Krishna’s pastimes that their bodies imitated their beloved in the way they moved, smiled, glanced, spoke, and so forth. With their hearts [dedicated] to him, the women declared ‘I am He’” (130: X.30.1-3). We will return later to this assertion of an identity that finds itself in another, but, for now, I simply wish to stress that Krishna orchestrates his separation in order to induce the *gopis* to follow him. He explains that, even as he has remained hidden, he actually has been reciprocating. As some critics have reasonably argued, such “reciprocity” appears to be “rather sadistic at times. After all, going to the extreme of denying all of one’s relations and even destroying one’s life to love God is not really love at all, but an exaggerated form of divinely-masked servitude or slavery” (with slavery to a husband and a social order being displaced with slavery to God).<sup>17</sup> But, as any reader of this text knows, the *Bhagavata Purana* does not follow the dictates of reason.

In the *Bhagavata*’s version of the story, Krishna never returns to Vrindavan, and the cowherd women are obliged to spend the rest of their mortal lives remembering and mourning him. Indeed, the distancing effect of loss transforms emotion into a mode of remembrance. We might

even say that Krishna is another name for this distancing effect. While Krishna never returns to Vrindavan, he does, however, encounter the cowherd women again at the pilgrimage site of Kuruksetra. The occasion is a total eclipse of the sun—another moment of sheer darkness—but this time the kind that augurs the world’s dissolution. Sorrow turns into verse, poetic utterance again begins in loss, and the songs of the *gopis* are throughout touched by separation and longing. If Krishna can be said to have been born under the sign of photography—if his story is a tale of stars and moons, light and darkness, distance and separation, correspondence and withdrawal, and life and death—what the *gopis* complain of their own photographic plight. They suggest that the creator of their eyes has erred, since blinking eyelids hinder their contemplation of Krishna’s face: “When you go, Lord, to the forest during the day, a moment becomes an eternity for those who do not see you. He who created eyelids is dull-witted, from the perspective of those beholding your beautiful face, with its curled locks of hair” (136: X.31.15).<sup>18</sup> In the *Bhagavata*, it is left to the philosopher-king Nimi to express his desire to inhabit the photographic blink. After giving up his body, he speaks from beyond the grave to resist the transmigration of his self into another body, saying that he does not wish to re-enter his body (because, he claims, he dislikes birth as much as he does death). Responding to his request, the gods offer him the chance to live without a body by enabling him to take up residence in the bodies of all beings through the opening and closing of their eyelids, through, that is, the opening and closing of the body’s own camera shutter.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>18</sup> This point is repeated later in the *Bhagavata*, when Sri Suka continues his narrative: “The *gopis* obtained their beloved Krishna after such a long time. Gazing at him, they cursed the person who had created eyelids on their eyes.” (349: X.82.40).

<sup>19</sup> The story of Nimi is relayed in Book IX of the *Bhagavata*. See especially chapter 13, verses 1-11, in *The Bhagavata Purana*, (trans. Ganesh Vasudeo Tagare), Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1976, pp. 1193-1195.



Sarla Goraye (“Simple”) Vrindavan, India



Seva Sasi (“Service”) Vrindavan, India

<sup>20</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton UP, 2000, p. 117. Much of what follows is indebted to Chakrabarty’s incisive historico-theoretical comments on Bengali widowhood.

## V.

In his book, *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies “a certain will to witness and document suffering for the interest of a general reading public, and claims that this will has embedded itself in modern Bengali life [...] Both this will and the archive it has built up over the last hundred years are part of a modernity that British colonial rule inaugurated in nineteenth-century India.” “What underlay this will to document,” he goes on to say, “was an image of the Bengali widow of upper-caste Hindu families as a general figure of suffering. . . . It is not that every Bengali upper-caste widow has suffered in the same way or to the same extent throughout history or that there have been no historical changes in widows’ conditions. Many widows earned unquestionable familial authority by willingly subjecting themselves to the prescribed regimes and rituals of widowhood. Many also have resisted the social injunctions meant to control their lives. Besides, factors such as women’s education, their entry into public life, the subsequent decline in the number of child brides, and the overall increase in life expectancies have helped reduce the widows’ vulnerability.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet there is no question that widowhood exposes women to a number of difficulties and trials in the patrilineal, patrilocal system of kinship of upper-caste Bengali society. The prescribed rituals of widowhood suggest that it is regarded as a state of inauspiciousness. The rituals take the form of extreme and lifelong atonement on the part of the widow. Celibacy, dietary restrictions, unadorned bodies that carry familiar, defining marks—a lack of jewellery, a shaved head or cropped hair, white saris that signal both a relation to death and an absence of desire,

white ash on their forehead—aim not only to make widows unattractive and to set them apart from others but also to control their sexuality. Stories from as early as the nineteenth century reveal the torture, oppression, and cruelty that often, if not always, has accompanied the experience of widowhood. As Uma Chakravarti has noted, among the upper castes, widowhood is a state of sexual and social death.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, widowhood was not registered as a problem in Bengali society until the arrival of colonial rule. Indeed, the problems of widowhood rarely, if ever, received any attention. Colonial rule erased this inattention, as it began to write the history of modern widowhood, with the help of Bengali social reformers such as Rammahoun Roy, who worked to make *sati* illegal in 1829, and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, who actively worked to give widows the legal right to remarry through the 1846 Act for the Remarriage of Hindu Widows. In Chakrabarty's words, "[t]he capacity to notice and document suffering (even if it be one's own suffering) from the position of a generalised and necessarily disembodied observer is what marks the beginnings of the modern self. . . . The archives of the history of the widow-as-sufferer eventually came to include the subjectivity of the widow herself. The widow became both the object and the subject of the gaze that bore witness to oppression and suffering. . . . To build an archive of the widow's interiority, to see her self as deep and stratified, to hear her own voice, as it were, required the development of a set of observational techniques for studying and describing human psychology. This was a role performed primarily by the novel. . . . To delve into the interior world of the widow, whose innermost feelings were denied recognition by society, was to write the desire for freedom and self-expression into the very

structure of the new Bengali subject."<sup>22</sup> What Chakrabarty suggests is that Bengali modernity—with its delineation of a subject who can bear witness to the problems of widowhood—arose in relation to European narratives of the modern observing subject. While Sheikh also seeks to bear witness to the plight of dispossessed widows, his work goes beyond this colonialist gaze, not only by including and multiplying the many perspectives of the women he photographs, but also by contextualising their lives in relation to, among others, the story of Krishna and the history of Vrindivan. Moreover, as I have argued, his insistence on the mediatory character of vision in general suggests that, however much his work may wish to present the widows to us, to expose their vulnerability and distress so that these might be ameliorated by enforcing legislation and collective action, it can never fully capture or expose its subjects, since to do so would require its being able to incorporate the entirety of the network of mediations through which we must view the widows. In producing a series of photographs that, because of the order in which they are presented to us (an order that emphasises the network of mediations through which we must pass if we are to begin to approach the widows), points to these women, even as it indicates that they can never be transparently or immediately revealed to us, Sheikh seeks to remain faithful to the widow's simultaneous appearance and disappearance, life and death, presence and absence, subject-hood and object-hood. This relationship between the widow as object and the widow as subject replicates the internal division of the widow's subjectivity, a subjectivity that, as it seeks its own form of agency, nevertheless remains linked to a script in which she must follow her husband, even in death, like the body its shadow. It is to this

<sup>21</sup> See Uma Chakravarti, *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of "Ancient" India*, Delhi, Tulika Books, 2006, pp. 156-182.

<sup>22</sup> Dipresh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, op. cit. pp. 119, 129 and 133.

complicated and contradictory subjectivity to which I now wish to turn, in order to delineate the widow's paradoxical and permanent exile from herself, even before her widowhood.

## VI.

What we register as we read the texts that accompany Sheikh's images is that the widows seem to experience "more and more of less and less," and perhaps especially because, being widows, they are no longer who they were before their husband's death. But if these women have lost their identity, can we say that they are dead or alive? If identity is the condition of possibility for mourning, how then can those who have lost their identity mourn? If identity is the condition of possibility for memory, how can those who do not have an identity memorialise anything? What kind of temporality constitutes their strange, non-subjective lives? What is the past of the life that does not belong to any identity? Or, to put it differently, what is the life of those who have lost themselves? Can they bear witness to a loss to which they cannot be present? Is it possible for a witness to witness his or her death while dead, while alive but dead? And, finally, is it by chance that all such questions are most profoundly and precisely addressed in the medium of photography?

What is exposed in Sheikh's photographs is the paradox of a face that is not a face, a face that can never be seen directly as the face of the woman at whom we are looking.<sup>23</sup> This is a face that exists, in the wording of Branka Arsic, as "the negative of the face: it is the face that is not, it is the visibility of the effacement in the moment of its effacement."<sup>24</sup> This is why, paradoxically, since Sheikh was

not present at the moment of the widow's "death," at the moment of the death that makes her who she now is, who she now is not or no longer, he can witness only what he did not witness by allowing the other, the one who died but remains "alive," to speak through him. He desubjectivises himself, and thus becomes—through his work, through his photographs, through his texts and through his effort to listen to and see this or that woman who is no longer—the survival of the other who did not survive. The act of bearing testimony to the desubjectivation of the victim therefore requires a labour of the desubjectivation of the witness. In the wording of Giorgio Agamben, "Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking... enter into a zone of indistinction... This also can be expressed by saying that the subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to a desubjectivation."<sup>25</sup> This means that a witness always witnesses a desubjectivation of the other, but also of himself.

This series of photographs, however, attempts the impossible: to produce the witness who would testify to her own non-surviving. This is the paradox of a testimony that would bear witness to the moment of a death and to the testimony of this death, which is to say to a moment in which life is at the same time dead and alive. This is why the photographs bear witness to a different temporality of witnessing, a temporality in which the past is contemporaneous with its present, and in which the widow is therefore never present to herself: she is always in a moment of exile.

But what does it mean to be in exile? What precisely is exile? For Freud, this question touches upon the

<sup>23</sup> I develop this idea of a face that is not a face from Judith Butler's discussion in *Precarious Life* of the way in which the giving of a face can, at the same time "derealise" the face. As she puts it, "It is important to distinguish among kinds of unrepresentability. In the first instance, there is the Levinasian view according to which there is a 'face' which no face can fully exhaust, the face

understood as human suffering, as the cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation. Here the 'face' is always a figure for something that is not literally a face. Other human expressions, however, seem to be figurable as a 'face' even though they are not faces, but sounds or emissions of another order. [...] In this sense, the figure underscores the

incommensurability of the face with whatever it represents. Strictly speaking, then, the face does not represent anything, in the sense that it fails to capture and deliver that to which it refers." See *Precarious Life*, op. cit. p. 144.

<sup>24</sup> See Branka Arsic, "The Home of Shame" in *Cities Without Citizens*, ed. Eduardo Cadava and Aaron Levy,

Philadelphia, PA, Slought Books and the Rosenbach Museum, 2003, p. 40. I am indebted in this section—and in my formulations here—to Arsic's discussion in her essay of the face's negativity, and of desubjectivisation and exile.

<sup>25</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen), New York, Zone Books, 2002, pp. 120-21.

fundamental, defining experience of subjectivity. As he suggests in his essay, “The Uncanny,” what is homelike is already inhabited by what is unhomelike.<sup>26</sup> To be in one’s own home is precisely never to be in it, always to be outside it. To be more precise, one can truly only be “in” one’s home when one is outside it, when one no longer inhabits it. One can only be “in” one’s home, that is, when one has left it. In our context, this means that the widow is a subject because she leaves herself, because she is always already in exile: she is a subject only insofar as she is homeless. This point already is made in the *Bhagavata*. There, in Book X, the *gopis* become so absorbed in Krishna that they cannot find their own homes: “Their minds absorbed in Krishna, the *gopis*’ conversations focused on him, their activities centred on him, and they dedicated their hearts to him. Simply by singing about his qualities, they forgot their own homes” (134: X.30.43). But, as Arsic notes, this homelessness, this exile, “produces an exile different from that of the exile. . . . In one case, it is a question of exile as the overcoming of identity into a new identity that keeps within itself or shelters within itself the ‘former,’ sublated identity. In the other case, it is a question of a total interruption of identity. Interruption means: what constituted an identity is not sublated but gone, vanished so that there is nothing left that could assume another identity, so that what is left is only the pure outsideness of an impersonal life. This outsideness is exile. In other words, exile is the unbearable space in between in which there is nobody who can assume what has to be assumed in order for a new identity to be born.”<sup>27</sup>

This is where the disturbing paradox of these photographs lies: what is photographed is not a subject any more but it is not yet an object. The photographs are taken at the moment



Phulmala Rai (“Garland”) Vrindavan, India



Chapala Dhar (“Electric”) Vrindavan, India

<sup>26</sup> See Freud, “The Uncanny” [*Das Unheimliche*], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVII*, (trans. James Strachey), London, Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 217-256.

<sup>27</sup> See Branka Arsic, “The Home of Shame,” op. cit. p. 46.



when the photographed subjects are exposed to their desubjectivation, while still preserving traces of their subjectivity. The fact that this process is staged in the medium of photography once more asserts its importance. For there is no photograph that does not expose the photographed, while also subjecting it to objectivation. As Roland Barthes would have it: “The Photograph... represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis).”<sup>28</sup> The widow is a subject only when she does not have a self. This is why we can say that the “I” of devotion identifies with itself (with the other) through the process of identification, or, as we might say, by giving itself to another. The identity acquired through love is the effect of an identification that separates. The passionate passivity that characterises so many of Sheikh’s widows defines a life that has been wounded, a life of the wound. This living wound, this body, lives off of wounds so wounding, so avid, that they exhaust all life and turn the life of this passive existence into perpetual dying, neither life nor death, but a life that is lived by dying.

Nevertheless, it is the widow’s survival, her living on, even after her death, her social death, that indicates that things pass, that they change and transform, and, minimally, because this survival asks us to think not of the impossibility of a return to life but of the impossibility of dying, not life or death, but life and death, or perhaps, even more precisely, “life death.” It is this ghostly survival—as a metonym for all such survivals—that defines the madness of the photograph, too, since it is there, within the medium of photography, that we simultaneously experience the relation between life and death, between testimony and its

impossibility, between the self and an other, and among the past, the present, and the future. Indeed, whether or not the widow is already dead, literally dead, she will already have experienced (a kind of) death. This point is confirmed—less abstractly perhaps, but by no means less rigorously—when Neela Dey, one of the widows whom Sheikh photographs, tells us that, “in Vrindavan we are so determined in our devotion that everything else in the world is dead to us. We ourselves are dead and living with Krishna.”<sup>29</sup>

That this experience of living at the threshold of death and life is another name for the experience of love—for what takes place in our relation to the one we love, even if our beloved is Krishna—is confirmed when, in *A Lover’s Discourse*, Barthes confesses: “I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever.”<sup>30</sup> While he suggests that this loss of self occurs especially in relation to the absent other, he also implies that it happens even when the other is presumably “present,” since the very relation between a self and an other means that, because each already inhabits the other, because each is defined in relation to the other, neither the self nor the other can return to himself (or, in the case of the widow, to herself): the self and the other deconstitute one another precisely in their relation. The widow is already a widow, even before her husband’s literal death. That the widow is already separated from herself evokes the distance between a photograph and what it photographs. Indeed, we can never remind ourselves enough that the photograph gives us an image rather than what is photographed. We could even say that every photograph turns the photographed into a kind of widow. Tearing it from its context and displacing it to another place and moment, these photographs tell us that every image is

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (trans. Richard Howard), New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Inc., 1981, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Fazal Sheikh, *Moksha*, op. cit. p. 118

<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, (trans. Richard Howard), New

York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1978, p. 49.

widowed, insofar as its existence is the best indication that what we have before us, what we have in our hands, is not the photographed. This is why, like Sheikh's widows, photography exists in perpetual mourning for the referent in relation to which it emerges. If this mourning persists, it is because it acknowledges what takes place in any photograph—the return of the departed, of the one who is no longer here. This is why the return of what was once there takes the form of a haunting. This is confirmed not only by the fact that one widow after another dreams of her dead husband, and sees him in her dreams, time and time again, as if he were alive, but also by the shadow-lives that the widows themselves lead. This is why, we could say, the power of the photograph is revealed at the very moment of death, insofar as it continues to evoke, even after this death, what can no longer be there. Indeed, in photographing someone, we know that the photograph will survive her—it begins, even during her life, to circulate without her, figuring and anticipating her death each time it is looked at. This means that there is no photograph, no image, that does not consign the photographed to ashes.

## VII.

What Sheikh's photographs tell us is that the earth is not a place where humanity or rights are shared—and this despite their respective and repeated claims to universality. It is instead a place of inequality and injustice, a place of loss and death, a place where every day there are more women and young girls who are abandoned and abused, who are displaced and dispossessed, who starve, who are mutilated and raped, who are marginalised and exiled, and who live



**Bhajan Ashram** Vrindavan, India



**Dawn along the Yamuna River** Vrindavan, India



**Tupasi's icons** Vrindavan, India



Asha Rajak ("Hope") Vrindavan, India



Lakshmi ("The goddess of wealth") Vrindavan, India

without the full exercise of political and civil rights. It is a place where, because of the inequality and injustice often written into the very formulations and definitions of humanity and rights—and, again, despite their associations with a certain rhetoric of universality—the task of defining and realising human rights is infinite, and therefore permanently urgent and necessary. As Sheikh notes in *Ladli*, "in India's main cities, every six hours, a young married woman is burned to death, beaten to death, or driven to suicide by emotional abuse from her husband. According to the United Nations Population Fund, two-thirds of Indian women between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine have been beaten, raped or forced to provide sex. . . . The fact remains that Indian society traditionally subordinates women and its treatment of them amounts to a cultural prejudice as ingrained as any racial or religious divide. . . . What India suffers from is apathy—it is clearly not for lack of legislation that women and children are still abused, but because of the unwillingness of the police, the courts and the government to enforce the laws made to protect them."<sup>31</sup> That India can evoke the universalism of human rights at the same time that it continues to contribute to the regime it condemns (and here it is no different from every other nation, including the United States) is only one indication that what it means to be "human" by no means always counts with the same force, both in invocations of human rights and in their absence. This is why the question of human rights is a question that remains at the heart of any politics or ethics that concerns itself not only with who we are, but also with what it means to live in a world in which the call for human rights and humanitarian intervention is not always made in the name of preventing the dispossession of rights that so often defines the conditions of our human existence.

<sup>31</sup> Fazal Sheikh, *Ladli*, Göttingen, Steidl, 2007, p. 143 and pp. 187-88.

If Benjamin were alive today, he might remind us that there is no document of humanitarianism that is not at the same time a document of inhumanity, inequality and violence, and that the human rights activist should therefore dissociate himself or herself from it as much as possible. If the projects and discourses of human rights do not wish to neglect this counsel, they will have to define themselves continuously against the inhumanity, inequality and violence that threaten them from within as well as from without. Always and at once motivated by humanitarianism and democracy—but a humanitarianism and democracy that would correspond to other, more just, forms of humanitarianism and democracy than those we have with us today—they would begin in an aporitic praxis, one that would take its point of departure from the “perplexities” of human rights.<sup>32</sup> They would seek to inaugurate a world in which displacements, racisms, nationalisms, class ideologies, sexism, and economic oppressions of all kinds would no longer exist, and would ask us to imagine what the world has never offered us: absolute freedom, justice, equality, and rights. If this world can ever be inaugurated, if there can ever be a future that will not simply be a repetition of the past, it may well be enabled by work like that of Fazal Sheikh.

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I would like to thank Fazal Sheikh for his initial invitation to have me write about *Moksha* on the occasion of his exhibition, *Beloved Daughters*, at the Princeton University Art Museum in October 2007, and for everything that his work has enabled me to invent and say. I also would like to thank Pankaj Butalia for so kindly answering my questions about his film *Moksha*, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to whom I dedicate this essay, for her inspiration and ongoing friendship. For me, she too will always be a beloved daughter.

A more extensive version of this essay will soon be appearing as part of the volume *The Visual Cultures of Nongovernmental Politics* (ed. Yates McKee and Meg McLagan), Cambridge, MA, Zone Books, MIT Press.

<sup>32</sup> It is, of course, Hannah Arendt who famously wrote about the “perplexities of the rights of man” in her 1951 book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, Schocken, 2004, p. 290.