Chronicle of a Sati Foretold: Sunny Singh's *With Krishna's Eyes* and Indian Gothic

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Sunny Singh's second novel, *With Krishna's Eyes* (2006), is a disturbing and eloquent exploration of the dark side of "Shining India", in which the modern and globalised coexists cheek-by-jowl with the archaic and traditional, in a contradiction seemingly without issue and yet lived to the marrowbone by its intensely engaged characters. It confronts the vexed question of Indian modernity head-on, by boldly centring its plot on so controversial an issue as sati. In the process, it draws on the resources of Indian English and the Indian and non-Indian literary heritage to offer the reader an exploration of fear, in a specifically subcontinental context, that may justify its being taken as a highly original piece of what might be called "Indian Gothic". The author, born in Varanasi, currently (2008) lives in the UK, where she teaches creative writing at London Metropolitan University: the global reach of her work may be deduced from the fact that *With Krishna's Eyes* came out in Spanish translation (Sunny Singh was resident in Barcelona at the time) before it was published in English (it has since also appeared in French), while her earlier novel, *Nani's Book of Suicides* (published in 2000 and also translated into Spanish) was awarded the Mar de Letras literary prize in Cartagena (Spain) in 2003[1].

The title might already raise eyebrows, for the reader may legitimately ask whose are Krishna's eyes. Krishna is in fact the novel's female protagonist: women named Krishna are fairly rare, but they do exist[2]. If a gender barrier is being crossed through this naming of the character, we discover that Sunny Singh's Krishna, in many ways a warrior woman, is not without her resemblances to the Krishna the combatant sage of the *Bhagavad Gita* (though rather less so to the playful blue-skinned Krishna of the *Puranas*). The female Krishna of this novel is a warrior in the world of film-making, a US-educated member of a proud Rajput clan who is suddenly called on to make a documentary, all too non-fictional, about a willed and voluntary sati, the conscious choice of an educated woman at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Forced as a matter of family honour and obligation to live this intense contradiction, Krishna finds herself accepting a major part in a drama which she does not approve of but tries her level hardest to understand. She herself is a globalised Indian who has recently emerged from an intimate relationship with Natchek, an NRI and financial consultant even more globalised than herself. Now, back home in her ancestral village east of Delhi, she comes face to face with Damayanti, a friend of her family's: an educated, apparently modern woman, a graduate of Miranda House, Delhi, a Supreme Court lawyer who had in her time chosen a love marriage, a gadget-happy mobile phone owner, who nonetheless actively and obdurately campaigns for "her right to be sati" (145)[3] as soon as her ailing husband leaves the world: "I have petitioned the court for permission to be sati, when my husband dies" (100).

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[1] For more information on novel and author, see Sarangi, "An Interview with Sunny Singh".

[2] Sunny Singh has explained that Krishna takes her name not only from the deity but also from a woman character in *Krishnakali*, a novel by the Hindi writer Shivani (Sarangi, "An Interview with Sunny Singh", 212).

[3] All references to *With Krishna's Eyes* will be indicated parenthetically.

The inevitability of Damayanti's sati is etched into the reader's consciousness from the very beginning – it is as certain to come to pass as the honour killing in Gabriel García Márquez's *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*), a novel to which Sunny Singh's tale bears some resemblance. Krishna is impressed again and again with its necessity, by the familial pressure that descends on her from her grandfather, her sanyasi uncle, and, from beyond the grave, the voice of her late grandmother. It is a lesson of dharma, of unquestioned and unquestionable duty, of loyalty to family and clan. It is also the manifestation of a harsh and literal reading of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the homilies of Krishna's divine namesake. Between this novel's lines, one may hear the reverberation of the sacred text's slokas, but we are talking about no benign or liberal interpretation of the concept of dharma. The voice of Krishna which we hear through and around the other Krishna is that which, in the *Gita*, declares sternly: "Through fixed devotion to Me, it is possible to know Me thus, O Arjuna, and seeing Me truly, to enter into Me, O vanquisher of foes" (*Bhagavad Gita*, 11-54). For Krishna's relatives and for Damayanti herself, living in such a world of "fixed devotion", the sati is as necessary as the elimination of the Kauravas. It is her grandmother who declares: "See Krishna, first we must do our duty. Follow dharma, and most times, it hurts. But to love something doesn't mean to give up dharma" (91). Her uncle sings to the same tune: "Do what you have to do. That is the dharma of a warrior, right?" (283). Under such pressure, the young and modern woman comes to a large extent to internalise the ancestral belief-system herself.

It is as if Krishna the film-maker had to go through the ultimate anguish of living someone else's sati under her own skin; and indeed, fear is a major element in the novel, signified as it happens through certain trappings of the Western Gothic transposed into the Indian context. Krishna has already lived through the trauma of 9-11, the quite literal explosion of American Gothic in all its darkness. Used to a New York where "two tall towers rose to the sky like the crowning jewels" (36), she suddenly comes to see the city as "a sinister killing place, full of smoke and death and suspicion" (41). Now, in India, Krishna is confronted with atavistic fears – "dark shadows that crowded my mind", "long tongues of flame that flickered at the edges of my vision" (226). When first she enters Damayanti's house, she finds herself in a darkly oppressive Gothic space that recalls Edgar Allan Poe's House of Usher, as first experienced by its fear-struck narrator: "I was led discreetly through gloomy carpet covered halls, where the ancient, heavy furniture lay carelessly scattered through the rooms" (in the House of Usher, "Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about"[4]). Damayanti, "on a low couch, leaning against the many cushions that were piled up behind her", greets Krishna like a second Roderick Usher (who, to receive the narrator who visits him, "arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length")[5], to induct her into a world of ancestral oppression (98). Poe meets Rajput tradition, to generate an atmosphere of Indian Gothic that culminates in the scream that rises to the skies at the moment of the sati – a cry that is not Damayanti's but Krishna's, "my scream that went on and on, forever in my head" (289), and that might too recall how at the climax of "Usher" Roderick "shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul"[6].

Sunny Singh's novel does not neglect the sociological and ideological aspects of the sati issue – the saffron militants who demonstrate for Damayanti, the leftists and secularists who oppose

[4] Poe, 'The Fall of the House of Usher", 142.
[5] Poe, 'The Fall of the House of Usher", 142.
[6] Poe, 'The Fall of the House of Usher", 156.

her, the local peasants and functionaries who end up worshipping her as a sati-mata. However, the experience of reading this book is that we are dealing not with a tract one way or the other, but with a textually mediated perception of an Indian reality, communicated through specifically literary effects and emotively charged creative language. Seeing the sati *with Krishna's eyes* (those of the character and those of the god), reliving the dark tale through the Indian Gothic of Damayanti's House of Usher, the reader of this novel, Indian or foreign, will sense something of globalised India's attempt to come to terms with itself, its ancestral fears and still-alive past anxieties, its painful efforts to live through them once again in order, it may be, finally to exorcise them.

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