*Review Article*

# UNRAVELLING THE STORY OF THE SARI

Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller, *The Sari,*
Oxford, UK: Berg, 2003. 277 pp.

One of the most memorable episodes from the Indian epic *Maha Bharata* is the scene in which the eldest of the Pandava brothers, Yudhishtira, gambles away all, including the brothers' collectively owned (?) wife, Draupadi, to his arch-rivals, the Kauravas. This nail-biting scene culminates of course in the attempt by Thuchchadhana at publicly undressing Draupadi. Draupadi, who never challenges the Pandava brothers' absolute rights of possession over her, appeals to Lord Krishna to intervene on her behalf to safeguard her chastity. Krishna obliges. However much the sari is unravelled, it never unravels completely to bring about her public humiliation and, by extension, that of her husbands who can do nothing to prevent this shameful act. The sari, in other words, does not fail Draupadi, as her husbands do, at this most crucial of moments and attests, by failing to unravel fully, to her chastity. This could be the first public appearance of the sari as the undisputed defender and, by implication, a potent signifier of the "ideal" Indian feminine—a femininity that in its ideal form is imagined as passive, submissive, and chaste. Such is the iconic status enjoyed by the sari today that even outside India the sari is an internationally recognized symbol for the "Indian" feminine.

So, in the beginning, it could be said, was the sari.... Or, so it might seem since it receives mention in as ancient a text as the *Maha Bharata* for which no precise date of composition is possible. Indeed, the sari would have no specifiable origin "if what one was wearing was . . . the traditional local draped garment of a region (described in several [Indian] languages simply by the local word for 'cloth'" (215). But the 5 ½ metres of cloth, draped in a particular style and today called the "sari," is not so old. Its origins in fact can easily be traced to the emergence of India as a "modern" nation-state and attempts, willed and otherwise, to arrive at a pan-Indian national identity. As the authors of *The Sari* tell us, the widespread adoption of the "sari" by women in different parts of the Indian sub-continent (and this includes those of us in Sri Lanka too) was closely tied up with the rise and spread of anti-colonial nationalism—the attempt by the nationalist leadership to resist "western" cultural hegemony by promoting practices recognizably "Indian" and the desire of different regional communities to become self-consciously Indian by adopting practices promoted as "Indian." "In the process, the sari was elevated from the diffuseness and variety of its historical origins into a precious and precise national emblem" (236). On page 219 of the book, the authors in fact reproduce a

picture that shows the extent to which the sari emblematises what it means to be Indian—both unfurling across India to fully cover as well as uncovering for the rest of the world the newly constituted nation called India.

Thus, it is not the authors' intention, as they put it, in the book titled simply *The Sari,* to present the sari as a timeless garment. It is their intention instead to present it as "the product of history" (235), a dynamic garment that has undergone, and will undergo, change in order to keep up with the vagaries of national and regional histories. This is a thesis that is amply supported by the transformations in draped clothing among Lankan women too within the last century or so.

It is a fact that in Sri Lanka even today many rural women in the upcountry region refer to the cloth that they drape round their body as simply "*reddha*" [=cloth] although the more sophisticated prefer the homogenizing label "Kandyan" in English or *Osari/Ohori* in Sinhala. And this dress, which at one point was two separable pieces of cloth (with the piece that goes over the shoulder separated from the cloth draped round the waist) is today worn from one piece of cloth, more often than not the same 5 ½ metre piece sold as "sari" in Indian and Sri Lankan shops. In fact, according to some, the *Osari* or *Ohori* was an attire introduced by the South Indians [the *Naayakkars*] who ruled and cohabited with the Sinhalese in the upcountry region or the Kandyan Kingdom during the last stages of its existence. The appearance of the sari, sometimes called the Indian sari, in Sri Lanka can be dated even more precisely. It was the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist leader Anagaarika Dharmapaala, or so the story goes, who was instrumental in introducing this style of draping the cloth to Sri Lanka. His mother, it is said, was the first to drape the sari this way on a pilgrimage to India (Jayawardene, "Cultural Identity," 174). Unhappy at the adoption of "western" modes of attire by Lankan women of the newly constituted bourgeoisie (decorated hats, gloves, stockings, shoes, and skirts/gowns), he decided to borrow the Indian attire in an attempt to instil/invoke a Sinhala Buddhist national identity via dress (Jayawardene, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World,* 126). He in fact designed an *Aarya Sinhala* or "national" suit for the Sinhala men, too, to wean them, that is, the local bourgeoisie, from their predilection for western-style masculine attire. Looking back on their historical origins, it is therefore interesting that the "national" suit of the men has not enjoyed the longevity of the sari. The Indian style of draping the cloth enjoys ubiquitous status among Lankan women even today while the *Aarya Sinhala* suit is in decline except among Sinhala politicians, as a result of which it is dubbed the *kapati suit* [=the attire of the cunning] by a cynical electorate.

In fact, it is hard to determine which of the two styles of draping, Kandyan or Indian, enjoys more prestige and popularity today. Looking back on Dharmapaala's historical choice, one wonders why he did not choose and promote the *Ohori* or the Kandyan over the Indian as the "ideal" feminine attire for local

Sinhalese women. Was it because the *Ohori* in its present form did not exist then or was not widely prevalent (this is indeed my suspicion although more research is needed before it can be stated as a fact),[1] or was it because his own "low-country" origins made him either ignorant or suspicious of "upcountry" attire? After all, we all know that there is a not-so well-concealed division and animosity among the Sinhalese along physiographic terrain as well, don't we? There is no way of knowing for certain what influenced Dharmapaala's choice. However, it is a fact that at that particular historical moment, Dharmapaala chose to adopt an attire that brought the "low-country" Sinhala women closer in appearance to the Tamils of Sri Lanka than the "upcountry" Sinhalase! Historical evidence indicates that Northern Tamil women have been adopting South Indian draping styles (without today's style blouse and petticoat of course which are of more recent invention) for a much longer period in time than the Sinhalese.[2] However, there is a tendency today to attribute an indigenous status to the Kandyan vis-à-vis the Indian sari.[3] One is not sure if this

[1] An observation made by Rev. Spence Hardy, a Christian missionary, would suggest that the Kandyan women that he encountered in the mid 19th Century did not wear anything resembling the present-day *Osari*. His tone bespeaks disapproval when he says that "the Kandian women ... when in their own homes, and about their every-day work, even with higher classes, in remote villages too much of their clothing is kept in the strong box, and too little worn" (qtd in Malathi de Alwis, "The Production and Embodiment of Respectability," 122). In fact, the practice, observable among older married women of all three major ethnic communities until recent times, of wearing sari, both within and outdoors, would have had much to do with the Sinhala Buddhist and Hindu cultural revival movements of the early 20th century.

[2] Malathi de Alwis' essay, which deals with transformations in local femininities, especially among the northern (or Jaffna) Tamils, as a result of missionary education that sought to inculcate in young Tamil women a form of bourgeois feminine propriety drawn from the missionaries' own lands, suggests that Jaffna Tamil women had been wearing a version of the sari when the "western" missionaries arrived in Jaffna in the middle of the 19th century (123). This attire, which was often worn without a blouse and petticoat depending on class, caste and location (that is, whether within home or without), was not to the satisfaction of the missionaries of course who found their clothing styles "indecent" (122).

[3] An article written on the just-concluded 9th SAF Games in Islamabad, Pakistan, for the Sports Section of a Sunday newspaper attests to this point. The writer reprimands the Sri Lankan female athletes for not wearing *Osari*, which he claims is a signifier of Sri Lankan women's "national identity," for the inaugural parade. According to him, the Indian and Bangladesh female athletes' appearance in (Indian) sari clearly signalled their nationality while our women's decision to appear in "western" dress (the female version of the suit), instead of their "national" dress [=*Osari*], probably puzzled the spectators regarding their

is because today the Sinhalese fear as much the imperialist intentions of its big neighbour to the north as those of the west. It is a fact that not too long ago, when anti-Indian sentiments were at their peak because of IPKF occupation in the north and east, which was widely interpreted as a sign of Indian imperialist aggression, there was even an unofficial ban issued by the anti-Indian ultra-nationalist elements given leadership at the time by the local political party JVP, against the selling of Indian-made saris in Sri Lanka, along with "Bombay" onions and "Masoor" dhal. Some orthodox Kandyan wearers would in fact insist that the Indian sari, with its particular scatter of "zari" motifs and *pallu* and border designs, does not quite suit the aesthetics of the former. In recent times, both wearers and designers, via a particular ensemble of hair, neck, arm, feet, and waist ornaments, along with special border designs, the cut of the blouse, etc., have accentuated the difference. The fast-growing beauty culture industry in Sri Lanka that is putting on more and more bridal fairs and fashion shows is only adding to the difference, with fashion designers looking to local fabric designs, jewellery and ornamentation traditions to capture a local flavour for the Kandyan.

Nevertheless, there is a perception among a certain segment of the population that only those who can claim "upcountry" or "Kandyan" origins should wear the *Ohori* while, in practice, this rule is not strictly adhered to. Many rural women of peasant origin, irrespective of regional affiliations, wear the Kandyan, while urban women, more and more, choose a draping style that suits their body composition and stature irrespective of lineage. However, as a colleague pointed out, the President of Sri Lanka (Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge) might be playing a role in elevating one draping style above the other.[4] The daughter of a Kandyan mother (the former Prime-minister of Sri Lanka Sirimavo Bandaranaike) and a low-country father (the former Prime-minister SWRD Bandaranaike), it is a fact that Chandrika self-consciously reserves or appears neatly coiffured and made up in expensive silks and handloom cottons draped in the Kandyan style for ceremonial occasions while at less-august functions she is to be seen not so neatly or expensively attired in Indian sari. So, for example, when she hoists the flag on Independence Day to mark Lanka's formal attainment of independence from Britain, she is in Kandyan. But when she addresses a political rally for the masses, for instance, she is in inexpensive synthetic/chiffon saris draped in the Indian style.

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national origins (Susil Premalal, XII). Such confusion, despite the fact that the Lankan athletes would have been marching under the banner of Sri Lanka at the inaugural ceremony!

[4] This observation was made by Lilamani de Silva at the presentation based on the book, *The Sari*, by Daniel Miller at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya (December 19 2003). Her thought-provoking remark is gratefully acknowledged

Indeed, it is said that there is an even more exclusive draping style among the Kandyans reserved for or found only among the Kandyan *radhala* [=aristocratic] families. If the pleated *pallu*/fall over the shoulder ends in a triangular shape, it supposedly indicates the wearer's Kandyan *radhala* status. So, it would be good to recollect that the President's mother did wear the *pallu* this way some times. In fact, there are theories about draping styles that distinguish between the left and right shoulders too but at this point I give up. What is important is that today the *pallu* or fall goes over the left-shoulder whether draped in the Indian or Kandyan style.

But many of us in Sri Lanka may not know that the style of sari draped twice round the body, pleated once in front and pleated/pinned once at the left shoulder, which we understand simply as the Indian sari, is indeed called the "Nivi" sari in India and that its first recorded appearance in India is attributed to Rabindranath Thakur's sister-in-law Jyananda Nandini (145, n.6). Today, this style of sari is fast becoming the standard style for draping the sari not only across India and other South Asian countries but also among Indian and other South Asian expatriates abroad, thus consolidating its hegemonic status over other draping styles. The *pallu* or fall gathered into a set of neat pleats and pinned to the left shoulder is today the working woman's sari in Sri Lanka while the flowing, or draped over the left arm, *pallu* is reserved mostly for special occasions such as weddings. Indeed, its standardizing/homogenizing tentacles are most evident in the "uniform saris" (113) of hotel receptionists and airline stewardesses whose neatly draped and pinned-to-perfection appearance is the envy of many a not-so neatly attired woman like myself! However, as the authors demonstrate, through resort to glossy photographs (3), before the advent and invention of the Nivi sari, there was much variation in draping styles, the most famous among which were the Tamil, Gujarati, Bengali, Kerala and Maharashtra styles. Today these wide variations in style are under attack from the Nivi style with only the rural poor in India hanging on to them and some regional styles resurfacing at ceremonial functions or on occasions that capture the ethnic and regional flavours. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, the Kandyan/Ohori has been able to hold its own against the imperialistic spread of the Nivi [Indian] sari but a third draping style, which in Sri Lanka is called "the Muslim sari," seems to be giving way. This style, as the label suggests, is found among the Muslims and resembles the Gujarati style but appears to be on its way out among the Muslim community with the younger, educated generation of women opting more and more for the Nivi draping style. But this same Gujarati style has started making an appearance at the weddings of the Sinhalese, especially as a distinctive draping style for brides. On all other occasions, it is the Nivi style, which was given a push towards its rise to the top of different draping styles in India by its adoption by Indira Gandhi. Indira Gandhi, who is as much a symbol of post-independent India in its present form as Mahatma Gandhi and her own father Jawaharlal Nehru, having

experimented with different garments on her state visits abroad, it is said, settled for the Nivi style of sari in her most celebrated state visit abroad to the US (a photo of her stately walk with President Reagan captures her elegantly attired self in a silk sari during that visit on page 220). From then on, the meteoric rise to the top of the Nivi sari has seemed unstoppable. The adoption of the Nivi style by other famous female politicians such as Jeyalalitha or famous film and tv stars that the authors call "arbiters of fashion" (219) has only weighted the race heavily in favour of the Nivi style. So, one wonders whether President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga too will become a trend-setter, on the side of the Kandyan, in Sri Lanka. The trend set by her, if that is indeed what she is doing, might be strengthened by a series of prime-ministerial wives (Mrs Hema Premadasa and Mrs Rajapakse among them) opting for the Kandyan on all formal occasions although neither of these can lay claim to a Kandyan lineage.[5]

But this book on the sari, as its authors remind us often, is not a conventional or a general history of the sari narrated in the abstract tones usually adopted by scholars purporting to write "serious" academic treatises. The mission of these authors, and it is a worthwhile mission, is to "enquire first into the most intimate aspects of a woman's relationship to her clothes and then to explore, within the same volume, how these micro observations about individuals might be related to macro changes in the way populations relate to issues as profound as being modern and being rational" (253). In keeping with this objective, they begin with the biography of Mina, which traces one woman's relationship to her saris, that reminds us how very intimate indeed is our relationship with or ties to our clothes, especially saris. For Mina, the relationship with saris begins at marriage, when her Bengali in-laws require that she wear saris inside the house and out, but having begun due to external pressure, she is now "tied" to her saris in ways she never would have imagined in her pre-marital days as a South Indian woman whose family did not put as much emphasis on the wearing of saris as her Bengali in-laws (13). Some chapters into the book, the authors include a poignant account of a woman named Chandra for whom the sari offers a welcome refuge because it enables her to maintain the persona of a chaste wife despite having to live separated from her husband through pressure of work (145-47). Through this approach, which mixes scholarly analysis and intimate personal accounts, the authors deliver on the promise

[5] When it comes to Sri Lankan soaps, however, so far only old motherly-looking women have been seen in the typical puffed-sleeve blouse (a "must" if you wish to look truly "Kandyan"!) and *Ohori* ensemble on local tele-drama but one recollects a popular tele-drama of recent times, *Theerthra Yaathra* (2003), that seemed intent on show-casing the lost Kandyan heritage through a story set in a stately Kandyan mansion with women, young and old, looking elegant and dignified in typical Kandyan get-up.

made at the beginning of the book that "this is intended to be a different book about clothing, focusing on the sari not as an object of clothing, but as a *lived* garment" (1).

The approach is of course in keeping with the scholarly/ideological bent of at least one author who spoke at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, on this very same subject of sari. The author, Daniel Miller, presented his definition of what he calls "material culture" that subtends the research he undertakes as a social anthropologist. To him, the material objects that strew the world around us (and these include for him the computers and cell-phones of today as well as saris) are not mere objects lying passively around for our use but have a dynamic life that actually has an impact on the user. So, for him, the sari is no inanimate and passive cloth that merely winds itself around us at our will but rather enters into a dynamic interaction with the wearer. The Hindi riddle that the authors cite put it best: "Is the woman in the sari or is the sari in the woman? Sari is the woman and the woman is the sari" (145). In the authors' more scholarly lingo, "[a] study of clothing should not be 'cold;' it has to be involved in the tactile, sensual, emotional, intimate world of feelings" (253).

It is this "up close and personal" look at the sari that the authors unfold for us in much of the book. So we learn that in India, where the gifting of saris on special occasions, such as puberty rituals, weddings, and other ceremonies takes pride of place in some regions such as Bengal and Tamil Nadu, the relationship with the sari is more special than in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, for instance, there is only one mandatory gift of sari at a Sinhala wedding: this is the sari gifted to the bride by the groom's party for her "home-coming" (to her husband's home). While custom requires that one buys clothes for one's family members at special festivals, the Sinhala New Year or Christmas, for instance, there is no requirement that these be saris for one's female family members. In fact, nowadays urban Sri Lankans are drifting away more and more from gifting clothes as tastes diversify and choices multiply. Similarly, while it is customary that we buy clothes for our parents and immediate family members with our first pay-check, there is no custom-dictated obligation to buy saris. Neither are rules regarding the sacred and the profane, the pure and the polluted, mapped onto the sari as they are in India. We learn for instance that on her wedding night, a Bengali bride ties the end of her *pallu* to her husband's dhoti and that a commercial sex worker in Kolkota will not permit her clients to touch her *pallu*, which is reserved for her husband (37). Mina's biographical account reveals a custom that may not even be regional but sub-regional or familial. After every visit to the toilet, female members of her marital family are required to change out of the clothes that they had worn to the toilet (103). Even those working as household domestics obey these strictures against pollution by changing out of the sari worn at the workplace for household chores,

especially cooking, once back at one's own home. Such intimate details, regarding when one wears which sari, what each sari means to a person depending on caste, class and other determinants of social status, are what make this book, full of glossy photographs, special and a worthwhile read.

But the sari, in today's more individuation-oriented world, according to the authors, offers the wearer a forum through which to reflect her personality and political beliefs as well. So we are told, or reminded rather, of the penchant for "ethnic saris," special handloom weaves using natural dyes and distinctive regional motifs, among the politically aware, left-of-centre, sophisticates in India (198). There is no such trend discernible among Sri Lanka's elite, partly because sari manufacturing does not have the same deep-rooted and diverse history here that it has in India. While there has been a tendency in recent times to go for "handloom" saris, most if questioned would cite price rather than aesthetic and political considerations for their choice. For weddings and formal occasions, Sri Lankan women of all communities go more and more for "Indian" saris at the more expensive end. In fact, now that there isn't as much anti-Indian sentiments in Sri Lanka as a decade or so ago, women by and large have no compunctions at all about buying "Made-in-India" saris. Some who can afford it will make a special trip to South India to buy saris for family weddings, including the bridal sari. In fact, as air-fares to South India become more affordable, special trips to India for sari-shopping is becoming quite the "in" thing! Even the usual package tours to India, to visit the Buddhistic holy sites, sometimes include a mandatory stop in Madras for sari shopping. But for those in Sri Lanka, the invaluable knowledge about sari production and sales is not accessible. While the knowledgeable Indian sari shopper will distinguish among type of weave, fabric, region, design and yarn, Sri Lankans by and large know only to distinguish the "cheap" nylons or polyester saris from the more expensive silk saris. While we may have heard of the Kanchipurams, Manipuris and Benares saris, our knowledge of saris by region and weave does not go much beyond that. It would therefore be easier to take a Sri Lankan sari shopper for a ride than an Indian shopper. How many of us know that what is sold as silks and feels like silks may not be really silk but a mixture of the genuine silk and artificial? How many of us know how to distinguish between genuine handloom weaves and what in India are called "mill" saris mass-produced at power-looms? The book therefore contains a treasure trove of information for even the ordinary reader who like myself might wish to become a connoisseur when it comes to the purchasing of "Indian" saris. If only the authors had devoted a little more time to proof-reading, they would have caught the few typos that I did. Such an elegantly produced book should not be marred by such oversights even if they can be overlooked as mere typos.

But why is the sari different from other kinds of clothing as the authors seem to claim? The most important difference, according to the authors, is that it is not a "stitched garment" (1). The sari is inherently flexible because it is, after all, 5½ metres of fabric that permits its wearer to do what she will with it. "The Sari wearer sees herself as engaged in a constant battle to make her 'second skin,' that six yard piece of rectangular cloth, move, drape, sit, fold, pleat and swirl in a manner obedient to her will. What victory gives her, however, is a remarkable flexibility to accentuate, moderate or even hide features of her body . . . . The Sari forces a continued engagement, a conversation between a woman and her garment" (27). To me, this is indeed one of the most significant contributions of the book regarding the status of the sari in India and elsewhere. Their reading of the sari, which presents it as an inherently ambivalent garment, unmoors its association in certain circles with antiquated thinking or outmoded ways of being.

Does the sari actually conceal or reveal? Or does it permit or encourage a more tantalizing seductiveness for which the authors coin the phrase "the allure of modesty" (89)? To be more precise, the (seemingly) innocently bared midriff, exposed upper back, the half-concealed cleavage, or the breast accentuated and half-visible on the left side, according to the authors, make the status of the sari as a garment of modesty far from certain. And both the male connoisseur who confesses to finding the half-concealed erogenous zones seductive and commercial sex workers who speak of customers that insist on them being sari-clad for sex attest to the "allure of modesty." Conversations with individual women and producers of Bollywood films only confirm the authors' thesis. There is no better proof of their thesis than a survey of Bollywood movies for which the "wet sari sequence" (89) is a staple of their erotic fare. Having been cued into the covert allure of the sari on the silver screen and to the attention that filmmakers pay to costumes thanks to the authors of this book, I too started paying more attention to the clothes that stars wear in contemporary commercial Hindi cinema. What I discovered was that more and more north Indian film stars have been appearing in sari in recent times than previously with Aishwarya Rai, Karishma Kapoor and Madhuri Dixit, for instance, looking absolutely delectable in sari. Yes, the authors are absolutely right, I thought. These women who appear in see-through, single-shade chiffons, mostly pastels but sometimes black or white, reveal as much as they conceal and look so gorgeous to boot that the status of the sari does becomes quite ambivalent. In other words, can the sari then be declared unequivocally a signifier of tradition, which in the case of the Indian feminine, connotes modesty and chastity? But neither can it, however alluringly draped, be interpreted as a signifier of the immodest and indecent, as certain types of "western" clothing tends to be, so closely is it tied up with propriety and modesty in the collective Indian sub-conscious. The story of the versatile *pallu*, as told on pages 29-40, should suffice to explain what the authors

mean. The *pallu* can seductively unfold to brush against and beckon a lover, fold up around the woman's head and face to connote a shy modesty, or offer itself as a comforting wrap to a child desirous of a safe haven, among its many other functions. Thus, the authors, at times enthusiastically, celebrate the sari's equivocal status and present it as a dynamic garment that gives the control switch to the woman wearer. So in the hands of Chandra, the Bengali working woman and wife, it is deployed to signal her *pati-vrata* [=husband devotion]. But in the hands of commercial sex workers, the sari obviously functions as a "turn-on." The Sri Devi, of the Bollywood silver screen, and her contemporary successors, on the other hand, remind us of the "allure of modesty."

Indeed, there is a newer definition of the sari that is emerging as more and more urban educated women enter the world of waged work as corporate executives and professionals of all hues. This is the "Power Sari," South Asia's answer to the "Power Suit" of the West (125). The "Power Sari" aims for "the carefully casual look" (125) that connotes to bosses, equals, and underlings alike that the woman is in control. The seeming effortlessness with which they wear the sari (the "slipping *pallu*" is in fact a trade-mark of the power-sari wearer according to the authors), avoiding in fact the "pin-cushion" look, indicates that they are in charge and are capable of handling, with confidence, all crises and challenges including a slipping *pallu* (126). But, unlike the "power suit" of the West, which can be "forceful but unequivocal, the power sari can be handled dynamically and ambiguously" (127). In other words, it dazzles and distracts and is never unequivocal in its message about the woman who dons the sari. Is she conformist or non-conformist, traditional or modern? It keeps the on-looker guessing. As a professional woman who has voluntarily opted for sari for official, workaday wear, I can attest to the validity of this thesis. The sari is my chosen attire for cultivating an ambivalent persona as a woman who locates herself simultaneously within and outside of tradition/"culture." The sari earns me a respect and a hearing (in certain circles) that other "western-style" attire would not. But I like to think that I am able to manipulate the "hearing" gained as a "traditional" woman in order to destabilize the automatic link between the sari and a certain type of conformist passivity. Sri Lankan professional women, by opting for the sari more and more, and wearing it with ease, indicate to the world, especially their male colleagues, that the sari does not necessarily signify "six yards of bondage" as Kumari Jayawardene once put it ("Feminism in Sri Lanka," 18).

But do the authors over do the image of the sari wearer as a freely choosing agent? Are we always free, or totally free, to determine the lineaments of our appearance? Isn't what we wear determined too by what one of my American students once called "degrees of social comfort"? An example might help prove my point. Is my decision to wear a sari for a wedding made solely by me in accordance with personal aesthetics or by my understanding of what is considered appropriate at

such functions? The authors admit to as much in the last chapter when they talk of clothes having to "feel right" in the social as well as in the physical sense. We do not always choose clothing in other words on the basis of physical comfort but on the basis of social comfort, which may in fact compromise on the former. So, where in the tropical heat women opt for the tight bodice, petticoat and six yards of cloth in order to ensure social comfort at the expense of physical comfort, the men opt for western-style trousers, shirts, coats and ties, to ensure their own sense of social comfort! The authors focus on the positive side to this social comfort, rather than the negative, when they speak of the sari as enabling women to perform the "tasks of life." The sari, in other words, not only protects from the sun but also from the male gaze, or not only makes weeding in paddy-fields easier but also manages one's reputation (244). But, as said before, in their eagerness to present the sari as equivocal in its meanings and functions, and not the symbol of traditional India as it is sometimes taken to be, they tend to overlook the ways in which the sari defines the wearer and traps the woman in roles/functions, even becoming on rare occasions a death-trap.

I am referring of course to the "accidental" deaths of a significant number of women, mostly in north India and among certain classes and castes, as a result of the sari catching fire. While there is growing evidence that these "accidents" are really murders perpetrated by the husband and/or in-laws of the woman-as-wife dissatisfied at dowry portions, the crime has been hard to crack and prove because women are expected to wear sari around the house and most today resort to the cheap, convenient but extremely flammable nylon saris. If there was more freedom for women to wear clothing that was safer for cooking at the kerosene/gas stoves, such crimes would be easier to prove and to prevent. To me, one of the most potent and tragic associations of the sari today therefore has to do with dowry-deaths. The authors, however, mention the spate of dowry deaths only twice (100) and that too in passing although this particular crime against women has very much to do with attire, the sari. Perhaps they do not wish to sensationalize and give prominence to a crime that has received too much publicity, especially in the "western" media where it is sometimes taken to be yet another instance of a generalized "third world" iniquity against women. While numbers may not be large and the crime itself under abatement due to timely interventions by local feminist activists, I personally do not think it should receive such short shrift in a book devoted to the sari. And, as mentioned before, it may be because the authors wish to celebrate the sari rather than focus too much on its shortcomings.[6]

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[6] In fact, how very tragic the association between Indian women and the sari could be was brought home to me in an incident that was reported in the news in the second week of April, 2004. A mass sari-distribution event had been organized by a Senior BJP [Bharatiya Janata

Yet it would be unfair to say that the authors are altogether unrealistic in their celebratory portrayal of the sari when, in the last chapter of the book, a certain elegiac note inflects their look at the status of the sari in contemporary India. Is the sari, the garment with no specifiable origins, finally reaching its end? Does the present day popularity of the sari, on the silver screen and on television, then signal its swan song? Interestingly enough, the garment that is threatening to dislodge the sari from its place is not western-style attire, as has been the case in many a non-western country including Sri Lanka, but the Shalwar Kamiz. The shalwar, once a regional costume, i.e., the attire of women of the Punjab, is now acquiring pan-Indian popularity and acceptance. How did this happen? Why did this happen? Their scholarly explanation is of use and significance to those of us interested in fashion trends in contemporary Sri Lanka as well.

The shalwar first caught on among post-pubescent urban young women in India who, in line with contemporary trends, postponed marriage to engage in education and employment. The shalwar was perceived as an "asexual grown-up garment" that young women could don as they set about the business of education and employment before they had to don the sari, which had come to be synonymous with married respectability (240). However, what is interesting is that now it is catching on among older married women as well, especially of the urban middle class. If questioned, the wearers of the shalwar, would cite convenience, or functionality, as subtending their choice. It is easier to maintain, wear, and manoeuvre in, because it is stitched clothing, they would say. In today's modern world where time is of the essence, one spends less time getting into it and less time attending to it once in it. In Sri Lanka, too, a similar bent towards the shalwar kamiz, among women of all communities, is discernible. Where, two decades ago, only young women of the Tamil and Muslim communities, especially those of the latter, were seen in shalwar (with the shawl, worn demurely round the neck to cover the breasts, an essential part of the attire), today, young and old women, especially of the Sinhala community, are to be found in shalwar, with or without the shawl. These fashion-inspired shalwar wearers can be easily distinguished, by the cut of the

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Party] politician in Lucknow, India, ostensibly to celebrate his birthday but, according to political opponents, to drum up support for the BJP in the up-coming national elections of India. ("Bribing" the poor with gifts and promises after all is a tried and tested method of vote-getting in South Asian politics!) According to reports, up to 15,000 poor (i.e., economically disadvantaged) women packed the grounds to get a free sari; a stampede ensued at the announcement that the sari-distribution had begun; desperate cries rent the air as women were thrown to the ground and stamped underfoot; 21 women and a child lay dead when the dust settled with scores more ending up wounded in hospital (Chandima Dissanayake, 19).

shalwar and the draping style for the shawl, etc., from the Muslim women for whom the shawl (draped in a particular style either to cover the breasts alone or breasts, neck, and head) connotes the modesty required by Islam. The trend begun among the urban upper class women has now spread to Sinhala women of the lower income brackets as well. I call this trend the "Indianization of the Lankan/Sinhalese woman"! If asked, these women too would invariably cite "convenience" as their reason for choosing the shalwar over sari. However, what such women do not ask themselves is why they've chosen the convenience of the shalwar over the convenience of "western-style" stitched clothing, such as jeans, trousers, tee-shirts, shirts, skirts and blouses. While there was at one time, and still remains, a trend among adult Sinhala women to move towards rather ungainly "below the knee" skirts and shapeless blouses for casual wear, the shalwar is making inroads among such older married women as well who are looking for "respectable" or "decent" stitched clothing that is easier to get into and requires less manipulation. Some in the more cosmopolitan urban circles see the shalwar as an acceptable alternative to the sari at more formal gatherings, even seeing it as suitable attire at weddings. As I see it, the shalwar affords women, especially older Sinhalese women, an opportunity to be "modern" without being "western" since "western-style" clothes in Sri Lanka conjure up an image of an overly sexualised woman who has betrayed her culture. "Indian" attire does not earn the wearers the wrath of the nationalists as much as "western" attire. Nor are they exposed to the derisive looks, comments, and gestures (of men) reserved for those women who "dare" to appear on public roads and transport in such attire.

But the authors insert a critical wedge into this increasing association of the shalwar with a "function-oriented" and "modern" India. And that, to me, is the most valuable critical insight that this book has to offer. How is it that the shalwar, as "traditional" and "Indian" as the sari, comes to be dubbed "modern" and progressive, while the sari comes to be increasingly associated with "tradition"? According to the authors, neither garment is inherently this or that and arguments about the "functionalism" of the Shalwar vs. the "cumbersome-ness" of the sari are "post-hoc rationalizations" (240) that arise out of attempts to provide reasons for why we do what we do. So, they cite the case of the rural paddy farm workers who see the sari as more functional than the shalwar for the type of work they must do—such as standing in water for transplanting and weeding. The sari can be hitched up, the shalwar cannot be, to prevent it from getting wet and muddy. The female lab technicians working at a high-tech laboratory in Mumbai, on the other hand, see the shalwar as functional because it leaves both hands free to hold a petrie dish, for instance, with care as they climb up and down stairs. "Functionalism," in other words, is not inherent in either type of wear but depends on the type of work one does and what one understands as "functional." The authors also lash out at the

discourse on modernity that offers a certain dualistic vision of the world as either this or that. The question that the authors pose is this: why cannot something be a bit of both? The sari is an example of this fuzzy logic. As mentioned earlier, the sari enables the wearer to perform the tasks of life that can be both utilitarian and symbolic. So the woman who appears at the community well/water source to do the family wash in the sari may be able to manage her reputation as well as her laundry, just as the *pallu* protects the woman from the sun and the male gaze (245). It is this ambivalent status of the sari, as both functional and symbolic, that is in danger of disappearing as the sari comes to be dissociated more and more from the ordinary workaday world and elevated to the realm of the symbolic. As the authors put it, "[t]he awe and aura of the sari is constructed precisely by its separation from the mere dross of utilitarianism and pragmatism. In this story, then, to see oneself as modern means subscribing to the values embodied by the shalwar kamiz" (247).

So, will the sari one day come to assume the status of the Kimono in Japan, a "formalized representation of ceremonial nationhood" (249)? Well, for those who, like myself, may not wish to see the sari suffer the fate of the Japanese kimono, there is good news. The book does not sound the death-knell for the sari. In a comparison between the kimono and sari, the authors suggest that the sari, because of its sheer simplicity and low cost compared to the kimono, will never become wear reserved only for ceremonial occasions. The flexibility and performance of the Nivi style of draping, for instance, will safeguard its foothold in the workaday world despite inroads made by the shalwar. And, anyway, say the authors, the relationship between the sari and the shalwar should be seen as one of "complementary development" rather than of opposition because what is taking the place of the sari in India is another "Indian" garment. There is no danger, in other words, of the "global blandness" of "western-style attire" invading India with the colourful shalwar and sari in place as alternating and perfectly acceptable modes of attire for all occasions (252)! And that is cause for celebration.

So the book may not end on an unequivocally optimistic note. But nor does it sign the death warrant on the sari. The sari may be, at the moment, recording a phase that is less than that of its peak use and popularity sometime back. But there is no reason for undue worry and concern. The versatile sari, as it has done through time immemorial, will find a way to adapt itself to the new demands of the present historical moment, made by those who are pressed for time and asking that it be more functional. Already there are "ready-made" Kandyans, sari blouses and petticoats to be bought off the counter. Who knows, what with fashion-designers in both India and Sri Lanka going for designer collections of saris, the time may come very soon when we may be presented with a ready-made sari, easily put on and taken off, with no pins, no hassle! But then some of us women, who are justly proud of our ability to wear the sari right and to move confidently in it, may not

wish for such "instant" saris that deny individual sari-wearers an opportunity to use the sari to reflect their own personal style. It might in fact be the first hurdle that the professional woman must cross in preparation for the other "hurdles" that might come her way throughout the day. Whatever the future that awaits the sari, with some women proving disloyal to the sari for the sake of convenience, I agree with the authors that it would be difficult to dislodge the sari, in the foreseeable future, from its status as a signifier of Indian and Lankan femininity in the collective imagination. So one can only say, with other well-wishers, "Vive le Sari"!

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