

Text, Textile, and the Body in Baudelaire's 'A une mendiante rousse' and Devi's Indian Tango

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Michelle C. Lee,
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Abstract: In her article "Text, Textile, and the Body in Baudelaire's 'A une mendiante rousse' and Devi's *Indian Tango*" Michelle C. Lee aims to rethink the post-romantic division between aesthetics and politics through a reconsideration of the idea of complicity in Charles Baudelaire's poem and Ananda Devi's novel. Lee argues against the claim that aesthetics needs to remain autonomous in order to be able to radically critique bourgeois society. Through a reading of the trope of clothing in each of the texts, Lee re-evaluates the formation of autonomous modernist aesthetics and attempts to show that avant-garde self-reflexivity engages in the very social questions that it had sought to abandon. Baudelaire's and Devi's employment of linguistic self-reflexivity blurs the boundaries between self and other, writer and character, as it constructs a socially informed relationship between speaker and interlocutor.

Michelle C. LEE

**Text, Textile, and the Body in Baudelaire's "A une mendiante rousse"
and Devi's *Indian Tango***

French romantic and second-generation romantic redefinitions of beauty involved a simultaneous re-evaluation of the "self." While romantic poets like Victor Hugo represented the self as the center of a tumultuous and changing world, post-Romantic poets such as Charles Baudelaire redefined and destabilized the speaking "self" by making it complicit with the plebeian realities of the outside world. While highlighting the importance of re-inventing the political and speaking self, this new subjectivity breaks down the barriers separating itself from the world outside, or its "other." Thus Baudelaire's pioneering self-reflexivity is in part founded on enacting a new engagement with the world, an engagement that provides the poet with a vocabulary to express his new aesthetic vision. In the article at hand I examine this concomitant development of Baudelaire's formal accomplishments and world vision to re-evaluate the formation of modernist aesthetics. More specifically, I probe modernism's underlying claim to autonomy from referentiality in order to contend that modernist aesthetics may retain impact on the world without sacrificing its self-reflexivity.

Inspired by the figure of the perpetually self-fashioning dandy as symbolic of modernist re-invention, I trace the role clothing plays in Baudelaire's "A une mendiante rousse" (1857) and Devi's *Indian Tango* (2007) in order to think through the contesting possibilities of modernist aesthetics at the interface of an autonomously conceived aesthetic realm and a social one. In both Baudelaire's and Devi's texts clothing serves simultaneously as a reoccurring figure and an allegorical site on which to trace the modernist transformations of both aesthetics and subjectivity. Central to my argument is an engagement with Debarati Sanyal's ethical reconsideration of Baudelaire's poetic form and Françoise Lionnet's reading of the leitmotif of the sari in Devi's text. I re-consider Sanyal's reading of Baudelaire's poetic "double postulation" as informed by a socially bound relation between self and other. Lionnet's reading of the multilayered sari as "cultural trope and key narrative device that produces meaning *in* the text while also functioning *as* a text" considers the sari as emblematic of the writing process itself (242; emphasis in the original). While Lionnet maps out Devi's multiple artistic considerations onto the sari as metaphor, I seek to trace the particular process by which the trope of clothing represents the author's political entanglement in her/his textuality. It is precisely at the liminal encounter between clothing and the body that the writer situates her/his dialogue with a textual interlocutor. Analyzing the intertwined relationships between the speaker and the beggar girl in Baudelaire's poem and the narrator and character Bimala/Subhadra in Devi's novel, I argue that the "self" that is made complicit with the text enters it as a social self. Finally, the trope of clothing, so useful for interpreting the modernism it metonymically evokes, illuminates an understanding of a de-naturalized body as shaped by its socially configured status.

The social Romanticism of Hugo and George Sand used writing to "engage" with the political world and conceived of a symbiotic relationship between literature and politics. Hugo promoted a humanitarian ideal through much of his poetry and prose based on an implicit ideal that the poet could transparently share his exalted feelings with his public. Second-generation romantics disapproved of this social agenda. Most notably Théophile Gautier in his 1834 preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* called for *l'art pour l'art* to free writers from what they perceived to be an imposed "moral imperative" so that art could serve a higher purpose: the preservation of and search for beauty. In this autonomous aesthetic realm, language stands in for the material world outside of the text as both referent and sign. However, it is my contention that the autonomy and self-referentiality of this new aesthetic expression is dependent on a language that remains anchored in the social realm to produce meaning. Existing in the collective realm, language serves to interpellate (to borrow Althusser's term) the body of the author into the social world of the text. The idea that aesthetics participated in the social realm can be gleaned from Immanuel Kant's writings on judgment and taste (1790). In an effort to make metaphysics pertinent to the ethical world, in his third critique, Kant theorizes the reflective judgment of taste in the category of beauty. His writing suggests that the reflective judgment of beauty is able to generate a form of freedom that bypasses the supersensible realm. As freedom remains ultimately unattainable in phenomenal experience, the beautiful becomes a phenomenal

iteration of this inaccessible condition. According to Hannah Arendt's lectures on Kant's third critique, it is precisely the necessary publicity of aesthetic judgment that gives Kant's critical writings political impact. She points out that the existence of subjective taste is dependent on the *a priori* existence of a *sensus communis*: the very ability to judge is itself not possible without judgment being a collective effort. Taking inspiration from Arendt's political reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, I show how Baudelaire and Devi's modernist treatment of language enacts self-reflexivity as it rethinks the relationship between self and other as a socio-political one.

In *The Violence of Modernity*, Sanyal outlines two possible narratives with which to read the modernist literary turn in the instance of Baudelaire. First, autonomous self-reflexivity and interrogation of reference provide a productive critique of the ever-increasing effects of capitalist alienation on social experience and organization. Second, modernist poetry is a passive reflection or testimony to the ongoing trauma of modernity: that is to say, its "breakdown" in representation mirrors the ruptures and shifts of economic, social and political modernization. Believing in the political possibilities of modernist aesthetics, Sanyal writes that "one of the most famous challenges to the Sartrean divorce between aesthetic form and *engagement* is found in Adorno's considerations of form itself as a privileged site for political critique and ethical reflection" (8; emphasis in the original). For Adorno, it is solely art's exercising of autonomy from the social and bourgeois world that provides the possibility of both reflection of and resistance to the banalization of mass culture commodification. His reflections on this debate help us to think toward the political richness of aesthetic and formal experimentation. Deformed and alienated poetic forms can themselves serve as protest, in the form of an estranged reflection, of a normalized hierarchy found in society. However, I argue that in Baudelaire's and Devi's writings the questioning of the subjectivity of the writer is the very undertaking that invites the world back into the text. Their experimentation with form and language, in turn, reinscribe the social world (abhorred by Adorno) back into their modernist experimentation with self-reflexivity and protest against bourgeois norms.

In *Les Fleurs du mal* Baudelaire offered a new representation of beauty aligning it with traces of urban decay and degeneration and embraced the new and the strange in his redefinition of beauty. For French Romantic writers such as Chateaubriand and Vigny, the beautiful was aligned with nature or the divine: Baudelaire inaugurated a new and modern representation of beauty inseparable from the alienating urban life of Paris in the second-half of the nineteenth century. Baudelaire introduced an entirely new cast of characters, outcasts such as the prostitute, the beggar, the *flâneur*, and the dandy. "To a Red-Haired Beggar Girl" ("A une mendiante rousse"), situated in "Tableaux Parisiens" of *Les Fleurs du mal*, evokes this new symbol of beauty. Baudelaire did not subscribe to a Rousseauian goodness of human nature: he preferred the external and interchangeable surface of clothing to think about the construction of beauty and identity. In the first stanza, "Pale girl with russet hair, / Tatters in what you wear / Show us your poverty / And your beauty" (169) ("Blanche fille aux cheveux roux, / Dont la robe par ses trous / Laisse voir la pauvreté / Et la beauté" [168]): "poverty" and "beauty" are paired in a rhyming couplet. Thus it is artifice and not nature that aligns the beggar girl in her state of poverty with beauty. Clothing serves as an allegory for the privileged role of ornament and aesthetics and as material object, it connotes his character's beauty. Moreover, the beggar girl and her clothes, both pointing to her poverty, serve as each other's referent. In the third and fourth stanzas, Baudelaire compares the *mendiante's* beauty to the garb of the elite and contrasts the urban tattered garments with French courtly clothing not only to underline the modern setting of his *mendiante*, but also to make apparent her social class. The clothing carries the urban social signifiers that mark the girl, whose beauty would be otherwise illegible in the poem without them. Baudelaire's representation of the beggar girl exhibits the inextricable connections between her aesthetic value and social position.

The idea of complicity plays an important role in Baudelaire's ironic eye. In "Au Lecteur" with which he opens *Les Fleurs du mal*, he addresses the "hypocritical reader" as his fellow brother. Setting the tone of his collection of poetry, Baudelaire performs a leveling of hierarchy between the poet and his audience, as well as undermines the boundary separating the two. By the same token, through his engagement with his eponymous urban heroine in "To a Red-Haired Beggar Girl," Baudelaire implicates himself in the poem, weaving together the identities of writer and its subject as interlocutors. In the second stanza, "For me, poor poet, in / The frail and freckled skin, / Of your young flesh / Is a sweetness" (171) ("Pour moi, poète chétif, / Ton jeune corps maladif, / Plein de

taches de rousseur, / A sa douceur" [170]), the poet introduces himself into the poem as "chétif," or weak. Baudelaire brings himself corporally into the poem by identifying with the *mendiante's* ailing body while drawing attention to his non-robust physicality. He aligns his compromised physique with the *mendiante's* body while recognizing her *douceur*, "her sweetness," or soft skin. In fact, Baudelaire who suffered from venereal disease for most of his adult life was very much aware of the invasive effect of a sick body. Together the English translation of Baudelaire's body as "poor" and the original adjective "chétif" point to the inextricability of social class markers and the body. Here, moreover, Baudelaire does not morally stand above judging the *mendiante*, but rather begins to resemble her (like the poet's relationship to his readers in "To the Reader"). Baudelaire inserts himself into his poetry as part of the modern and urban world whose characters, moods, and scenes he depicts.

Throughout her book, Sanyal finds ethical value in Baudelaire's poem and explains how the "double" postulation of Baudelaire's poetry is at the heart of the force of his critical irony. One of the ways Baudelaire maintains his tenuous "double" postulation in "To a Red-Haired Beggar Girl" is by putting his poet-self in the poem. He uses the familiar second-person *tu* form with the beggar girl, thereby putting himself closer to the interlocutor. Baudelaire speaks to, describes and interacts with her all at the same time. . In the following stanza "Meanwhile, you beg to eat / Stale bread and tainted meat / Thrown from an alley door — / Backstreet Véfour" (173) ("Cependant tu vas gueusant / Quelque vieux débris gisant / Au seuil de quelque Véfour / De carrefour" [172]), the use of "meanwhile" signals to the reader a shift in gears: we move from description to an action taking place. Baudelaire pushes forward the "plot" of the poem and paints an urban portrait of the beggar girl waiting in front of a restaurant for food. In this quotidian scene of poverty, Baudelaire compares himself to the beggar girl by putting himself next to her as homodiegetic narrator. In the next stanza Baudelaire writes: "And covet secretly / The cheapest jewellery / Which I (forgive me!) can't / Place in your hand" (173) ("Tu vas lorgnant en dessous / Des bijoux de vingt-neuf sous / Dont je ne puis, oh! pardon! / Te faire don" [172]). Hinging upon Hinging upon this introduction of the "I," the stanza alternates between distance and proximity with the beggar girl. At the moment in which he introduces the first-person character into the poem, Baudelaire confronts the *mendiante's* subject and class position as beggar, in which he no longer resembles her, but has rather become her other. Baudelaire and the subject of his poem are now connected in a social relationship: she is a beggar and he a possible giver. This encounter reveals to the reader how the relationship between the poet and red-haired beggar girl oscillates indeterminably between similarity and opposition in social status. If reading with only a modernist paradigm of aesthetics in mind, it may appear that Baudelaire's double-stance is a re-enactment of a modernist crisis of consciousness or that the breakdown in subjectivity results from the shock of confronting the new urban experiences of a changing Paris, as Sanyal's analysis outlines above. However, the category and experience of social class not only mediates the relationship between Baudelaire and the beggar girl, it also enables our understanding of the simultaneous distance and proximity between Baudelaire and the *mendiante*, hitherto attributed to modern self-reflexivity in language.

Departing from the viewpoint of esteeming the natural body, Baudelaire preferred the character of the dandy to the natural beauty of the female body. However, he does not simply seek to *re-dress* the naked female body to redeem artifice. Rather, Baudelaire shows that an unadorned body *no longer* exists. Even the natural body, as it were, is formed by its existence in and interpellation by a socially organized world. Sanyal claims that "for Baudelaire, a woman who has not been transfigured through artifice — through fashion or cosmetics — seems to be the very incarnation of unredeemed materiality. In artistic terms, then, 'woman' may function as a material body, a substance to be alchemically transformed by the creative process" (95). Yet the creative (and destructive) role of language always already performs this transfiguration through artifice when it represents the body, as shown by the collapse of the division between body and fashion in Baudelaire's poetry. The last stanza reads: "Go then, a starveling girl / With no perfume or pearls, / Only your nudity / O my beauty!" (173) ("Va donc, sans autre ornement, / Parfum, perles, diamant, / Que ta maigre nudité, / Ô ma beauté!" [172]). At first it appears that this stanza breaks away from the stated alignment between beauty and clothing to celebrate the natural beauty of the beggar girl without perfume and pearls. The *mendiante* possesses a *maigre* "emaciated" nudity being without both luxurious ornament and proper nourishment. Where the poem aligns "la pauvreté" and "la beauté" earlier, Baudelaire associates in

this stanza "ta nudité" and "ma beauté." Nudity appears to replace the *mendiante's* poverty in defining her beauty. With the uses of "your nudity" and "my beauty" the poem adds to the abstract concepts of poverty and beauty the specific experience of the *mendiante* and her encounter with the poet. This nudity, moreover, is not the opposite of, but an extension of the poverty described above. Neither Baudelaire's representation of the beggar girl's beauty nor the emaciated nudity determined by the experience of her social class is natural: the *mendiante's* social status is read on her body marked by economical disenfranchisement (on beauty and nudity see Agamben; Salzani <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1760>>). Baudelaire calls attention to artistic creation and social class as constructions that mold, change, and deform the body. The violence of textual representation resonates with the violence of the political world determining the body's economic and social experience.

Like Baudelaire, Devi is invested in revealing the contradictions and cruelties of the social realities of her surroundings. Neither writer gives in to rehearsing romantic visions; both maintain unrelenting critical distance with the world. In *Indian Tango*, Devi meditates on feminine identity, as well as on the reality of the social construction of woman's place in the home and in society. Devi explores the notion of belonging and identity at a national, political and psychological level while her narrative unravels and destabilizes the text through the speaking position of the narrator and an extratextual weaving of the trope of the sari. Exploration of Devi's modernist poetics helps us to further understand the multi-faceted construction of the articulating self as participant in her socio-cultural setting. Lionnet considers the sari as a metaphor for the act of reading and the writing process as well as a revealing point of entry into thinking about Devi's narrative choices and theoretical framework. As "both material object and allegory of textuality" extending throughout Devi's oeuvre, the sari, when carefully close-read, displays Devi's modernist self-reflexive treatment of both "ontological realities" and "social dispositions" (Lionnet 244). For Lionnet Devi's poetics is an exploration of the unraveling of "self" onto "other" re-iterated in other tenuously binary relationships Devi interrogates such as body and clothing, writer and character, text and critic, perpetrator and victim, among others. True to *l'art pour l'art*, Devi's writing — although asserting a piercing scrutiny of hegemonic relations — is not easily pinned down as solely voicing a social call for justice. As Lionnet has shown convincingly, particularly in her reading of *Le Sari vert*, moral judgments empowered by "truth" are as seductive as are facile assessments on the division between artifice and truth. But these judgments are ultimately a slippery position to take vis-à-vis Devi's characters. The image of clothing as textile and metaphor extends to inform and reflect Devi's self-reflexive insertion of herself as a character into her writing. The following section will demonstrate how the modernist relationship between "self" and "other," "I," and "her" in *Indian Tango*, a culminating work reflecting Devi's narrative preoccupations, is a socially bound one.

While the sari may stand metonymically for the femininity of its wearer, Devi renders both the sari and the subjectivity it is supposed to signify epistemologically unable to be deciphered. Here, in Devi's novel, the self-reflexivity of the writing performed both inside and outside the text implicates Devi's life as author as it explores the boundaries and fissures that lay between writer and object and belonging and not belonging. Devi tells the story of two older female protagonists whose lives intertwine at a music store: a retiring female author, turned *flâneuse* and Subhadra, whom the author-narrator names Bimala, a housewife in a heteronormative bourgeois Hindu family in Delhi. While Devi's books for the most part take place in Mauritius, in *Indian Tango* she explores the streets of Delhi through the tourist-eyes of the unnamed narrator. As menopause sets in for characters, they find themselves exploring the unknown terrain of a world outside of "rules" which govern movement and choices (*les règles*, a term for menstruation in French, also means "rules"; see Lionnet 277). In the narrator's open-air *flânerie* around urban Delhi, juxtaposed alongside the claustrophobia of Bimala/Subhadra's domestic life, the narrator roams the foreign streets in search of creative inspiration for writing, or as she articulates it, seeking the "partner of her insanity" ("l'autre de ma déraison"). This pursuit of unreason ("déraison") aesthetically unravels the identity and authority of the narrating *je* as it becomes other ("l'autre"), arriving outside of herself. The freedom of living outside rules is explored at a formal level and in the plot in the erotic and violent encounter between the two protagonists. The writer, finding her muse in Bimala/Subhadra, enacts in their joining a simultaneous questioning of the construction of selfhood as it points to the social boundaries that regulate female activity and movement.

The instability of the concept of the sari and the resistance of the symbol to un-problematically represent its referent are experienced in the narrative structure of *Indian Tango*. Alternating between a homodiegetic narrative, in which the author-narrator "I" is featured within the story and a heterodiegetic narrative that recounts omnisciently the domestic life of Bimala/Subhadra, the novel does not separate the voices into discrete parts. Both narrations resemble each other in their narrative obsession with the character-turned-object Bimala/Subhadra. In a 2008 interview, Devi explains that the introspective first-person narration provided astute and continuous reflections on the artistic craft, transforming this section into "a writing about writing" (Devi qtd. in Ravi 273) and I would add "a writing about the writer." Moreover, the narratives of her two protagonists progress from two different moments in time: Subhadra's story begins after their encounter and the writer's story begins earlier on when she sees Subhadra for the first time (see Davi in Ravi 278). Mirroring the two protagonists' cat-and-mouse chase around Delhi, the organization of the chapters alternate the two characters' perspectives first between April and March 2004 and then between April and May 2004 culminating in their sexual encounter and its aftermath. With this twirling narrative style, Devi explores a world ushered in by transgression outside of rules: "suddenly there appeared to [Subhadra] another possibility: the possibility of a rediscovery of herself, of her femininity, a different rebirth" (Ravi 278). The theme of rediscovery of selfhood in the novel is radically interwoven with a voice that questions its own narrative authority. Carefully constructing the backdrop of the novel with excerpts of contemporary debate and discursive commentary on Italian-born Sonia Gandhi's 2004 candidature for Prime Minister, Devi ruminates on the symbolic significations of the possibility of a future politics, reorganized through the lens of privileging a female and foreign figure. Exploring the collective and personal resistance of the "foreign woman" as symbol, Devi studies the violence of convention and social belonging as well as the potent force of struggling to break from the chains of familiarity. All the while, referencing Gandhi's participation in the elections serves to gesture toward a political potential embedded in Devi's narrative itself. The vignettes of current events socially engage with the world as their presence in the novel destabilizes the distance between the writer and her work (a relationship explored most intimately in the entanglement between the narrator and Bimala/Subhadra), as well as anchors the text in a politically defined historical moment.

In a heterodiegetic passage, a transformation occurs as Bimala/Subhadra prepares for her rendezvous with the city and the narrator. Anticipating this encounter with the unfamiliar ruptures her daily routine as well as Bimala/Subhadra's relationship to the system of rules according to which she lives: "It had taken her a long time to decide which sari to wear. She looked at the fabrics carefully folded in her wardrobe — perhaps they told the story of a whole life, hers, with their feminine folds, but at that particular moment, they were all heavy with looming storms — and she didn't like what they were saying about her. They all seemed too brightly-colored, as if demanding attention she didn't want. She didn't understand that any clothing she wore that day would glow with her own brightness" (130) ("Elle avait mis longtemps à décider quel sari elle allait porter. Elle regardait les tissus soigneusement pliés dans son armoire — peut-être racontaient-ils toute une vie, la sienne, dans leurs pliures féminines, mais à cet instant, ils étaient chargés d'orages en attente — et elle n'aimait pas ce qu'ils disaient d'elle. Tous lui semblaient trop colorés, comme réclamant une attention qu'elle ne souhaitait pas. Elle ne comprenait pas que tout vêtement qu'elle porterait ce jour-là se parerait de sa luminosité propre" [158]). Following the repetitive use of the imperfect tense, the employment of the conditional mode at the end of the passage signals a rupture of an archaic present into a conditional mode of an unknown future. The employment of the conditional tense explodes the monotonous tone evoked by the descriptive voice of the imperfect tense to introduce the possibility of a new ontological reality unimpeded by a linear logic of time. Moreover, like the rags of the beggar girl above, the collection of saris folded in Bimala/Subhadra's closet all "tell" the story, a socialized feminine story, of the protagonist's life. The sari covers over the body as it socially codes and narrates its history, and as Devi fabricates the fictional world in the novel. Bimala/Subhadra is faced with a rainbow of colors to choose from, none of which seem to be compatible with this new moment. This act of choosing from a collection of saris not only symbolizes Bimala/Subhadra's dissatisfaction with her current life, it allegorically represents the different masks a writer wears behind the narrators and characters of a story: "The sari," writes Devi, "is a thread you could follow, an Ariadne's thread that rolls itself up, folds, submits and unrolls again, leading straight to the heart of the labyrinth" (51) ("Le sari est un fil

que l'on pourrait suivre, un fil d'Ariane qui s'enroule, se plisse, s'assujettit et se déroule, et qui mène droit au cœur du labyrinthe" [67]). The list of reflexive verbs renders agency onto the figure of the sari. This piece of cloth calls out to the reader to follow its textuality to the heart of the labyrinth, the complex formation of the subjectivity of both the novel and the self. Yet at the same time, the folds, curvatures and rolls of the cloth form a labyrinth themselves, emphasizing that the cloth of the sari provides anything but a straightforward and linear route to the history it holds. The process of following the sari, either from novel to novel or around the streets of New Delhi in *Indian Tango*, involves a pursuit of the other. It is this very movement of "I" and "she" shadowing each other — which triggers the unraveling of the self into "the partner of [her] insanity" (17) ("l'autre de [sa] déraison" [28]) (see Lionnet 247, 253-54, 279-80).

Following the sari around the labyrinth, the writer becomes the hybrid shadow (10) ("ombre hybride" [20]) of Bimala/Subhadra. This relationship between an inseparable shadow and body suggests a change in privilege between the writer as knower and its object. This shift in perspective is further explained in the writer's confession: "I create Bimala and I am her slave. She does what I want in my dreams, but I can't force her with my words. My words can enfold her, clothe her, unclothe her; my words can't make her other than what she is" (114) ("Je crée Bimala et je suis son esclave. Elle fait ce que je veux dans mes rêves, mais je ne peux la forcer par mes mots. Mes mots peuvent l'envelopper, l'habiller, la déshabiller; mes mots ne peuvent la faire autre que ce qu'elle est" [140]). While she imagines Bimala/Subhadra, the writer realizes that she herself has become subjected to her character and caught in the unfolding of the story. The writer admits that in her encounter with Bimala/Subhadra, the writer's words do not provide her with the aesthetic freedom she enjoys in pure imagination. The words and text may dress and undress Bimala/Subhadra, to the extent of creating her, but they do not have complete control over her. This statement does not undermine the importance of the role of artifice as much as it highlights the tenuous relationship between words and the body they "dress." Moreover, the writer's realization that she could only clothe a Bimala/Subhadra that remains out of her absolute control serves to reveal the body as site of resistance: when either dressed or denuded, it continues to elude comprehension and linear logic.

The narrator further describes her pursuit of Bimala/Subhadra: "I seek you out, I follow you, watch you, project you. I'm the shadow of her [*sic*] identity" (114) ("Je te cherche, je te suis, je te guette, je te projette. Je suis l'ombre de ton identité" [140]). While "I" is the grammatical subject of each fragment (I look for you, etc.), the meaning of the verbs (to look for, to follow, to watch, to project) subjugates the "I" to the grammatical object "you" ("te"). Even the subject position of the writer becomes inseparable from Bimala/Subhadra, to whom the writer becomes parasitical. Moreover, in French, "I follow" and "I am" are both translated as "je suis" (see Lionnet 293). Indistinguishable in French, the narrator slips between being and following the object of her desire, as a rigid sense of self vanishes. The equivocal position of the narrator dissolves any stability of a self-privileging narrative, paralleling the ever-shifting relationship between the two protagonists. Amaleena Damlé considers how Devi's experimental narrative structure offers the possibility of representing an unessentialized female subjectivity by demonstrating how in her novels "a radical deterritorialization of character, author and reader ... are constituted by the rhizomatic gesture of writing itself" (Damlé 167). Maintaining that "*Indian Tango* epitomizes the nomadic movement permeating [Devi's] work" that allows for this in-flux of identity formation, Damlé shows how Devi's engagement with the specificity of female corporeal experiences surpasses the potential of nomadic becoming theorized in Deleuze's and Guattari's writings (152-53). Damlé reads the political possibility of Devi's de-territorialized subjectivity and writing in her engagement with specific female experiences and shows the inseparability between the nomadic *flânerie* around Delhi, the modernist narrative structure and a reflection on lived experience in Devi's novel. Damlé's thought urges us to take a closer look at the actual encounter with the body in which the possibility of "devenir-autre" is most potent.

Thus, when the narrator states "I will write Bimala. Ink, pen, words, all this will emerge from my body and inscribe itself on hers. What paper is lovelier than a woman's untouched skin? And what poetry lovelier than the poetry tongued on the body? (65)" ("J'écrirai Bimala. Encre, plume, mots, tout cela sortira de mon corps et s'inscrira sur le sien. Quel plus beau papier que la peau vierge d'une femme? Et quelle plus belle poésie que celle écrite par la langue sur son corps?" [83]), the body itself becomes inseparable from the sari as metaphor for textuality. For Devi, the body comes to usurp the

need for both paper and pen and as it functions in the novel the touch of the two protagonists' bodies drives the narrative development. Like the figure of the writer, the body is no longer a natural point of origin of meaning: both writer and body are imbricated and implicated into the constitution of the text. Another bodily trope extending through the novel is the "drying up" (*dessèchement*) of the narrator's femininity symbolizing her faded inspiration for writing. Here, Devi grafts narrative significance onto the biological function of menstruation. Devi not only explores the connection between the female body and the act of writing in the narrator's *dessèchement*, she explodes even a biological or natural understanding of femininity. The writer's biological and creative "drying up" points to Devi's preoccupation with thinking about the indivisibility between body and the ornament — or text and textile — that enshrouds it.

This dance between body and dress sheds light on a possible reading of Devi's self-referential insertions in the novel. There even appears an anecdotal character named Ananda, a monk whose isolated ascetic lifestyle the writer emulates and comes to understand at the end. However, Devi cautions her readers: "the novelist's aim is to hide as much as possible behind the words. But if by chance the desire arises for self-revelation should take hold, it will be done in such a way that no one will recognize the truth. Beware of the novelist's lies" (30-31) ("L'objectif du romancier est de se cacher le mieux possible derrière ses mots. Mais si d'aventure l'envie lui prend de se révéler, il le fera de telle façon que personne ne reconnaîtra la vérité. Méfiez-vous du mensonge du romancier" [43]). Showing the extreme side of this warning, the narrator of Devi's 2009 novel *Le Sari vert*, Doktor Bissam shows the resemblance between writing and the manipulating effects of a patriarchal puppet master. Moreover, Devi inserts autobiographical details in the following scene in *Indian Tango* with Velluram, the tea vendor with whom the writer strikes up conversation: "Velluram, the Tamil tea-seller, smiling and toothless ... has decided in spite of everything that I'm a local, a prodigal child, come home centuries later from *Mirich Desh*, even though I flew here from France (32)" ("Velluram, le vendeur de thé tamoul, souriant et édenté ... a décidé pourtant que je suis d'ici, un enfant prodigue, revenu après des siècles de *Mirich Desh*, même si j'ai pris l'avion de France. Il tente de décoder mon passé" [44]). By including that the writer has returned to India after centuries from *Mirich Desh* (Mauritius) but arrives from France, Devi elides the "je" narrator with her personal autobiographical details. This insertion signals to the reader the writer's admission of complicity with her own writing. In this instance of self-reflexivity, Devi links two narratives of authenticity: an external one that references her *Mirich Desh* and a textual one that suggests her character's belonging. In this narrative move, Devi undermines facile identity construction and points to the persuasive processes of logic and narration that buttress such understandings. Although, with a swift *clin d'oeil* gesture, Devi inserts autobiographical detail into the text, inclusion of this reference only serves to render her identity less decipherable, not more.

The sari is inseparable from the narrativization of the body as it cloaks and informs the identities of the author herself. Just as the writer follows the flowing lines of Bimala/Subhadra's sari around the streets of Delhi, the garment also circulates throughout Devi's oeuvre such that the reader follows the sari intertextually from novel to novel in Devi's oeuvre. In *Le Sari vert*, the figure of the sari represents the haunting and recurring image from and as conduit to the past, both of which reveal and conceal the "truth" of the death of the protagonist Kitty's mother. In *Moi, l'interdite*, representing a fragment of an irretrievable past, the white cotton sari bears the story of the narrator and signifies the impossibility of reference. Examples such as Devi wearing the sari herself in public appearances and yielding to her publisher's request to change the previous title of *Mal de nuit* to *Le Sari vert* point to how the sari operates figuratively within the text and socially outside of it (see Lionnet 268). While the ongoing presence of the sari in Devi's oeuvre signals its indispensability, it does not serve to provide clarity, but more complexity and depth to the concepts we use in our reading practices today, such as femininity, aesthetics, and politics.

Studied together, Baudelaire's and Devi's texts show the capaciousness of the aesthetic world and particularly of language. With the trope of clothing, both writers implicate themselves into the intertwined relationship between aesthetics and the social realm. Devi's and Baudelaire's texts expose the female body as a site on which histories and meanings are inscribed. Further, their texts bring to the forefront the role of the author and the act of deliberation and manipulation. While "je" creates an other out of her/his own desire, this fashioning of "je" is at the same time broken down through the

process of creation. Looking at Baudelaire's and Devi's writing together cultivates a nuanced view of the role of aesthetics in both "modernist" and "postcolonial" writings. These labels do not claim that Baudelaire's poetry should be classified as only "modernist," while Devi's writings ought to be limited to being labeled "postcolonial." I contend the opposite. The productive reading generated from the rapprochement between these two texts published 150 years apart from each other serves to complicate the maintained critical division between modernist (read aesthetic) and postcolonial (read political) interpretive practices. Just as Baudelaire wrote on the newly emerging social layers of a rapidly changing urban Paris, Devi's writings create a tableau of ethnic, national, and gendered complexities in the India (and Mauritius) she depicts. Both of these writers reveal the political and cultural contradictions of the social organization of a particular location through performing a modernist notion of self-reflexivity. Baudelaire and Devi poeticize representation of a local scene with narrative de-formation and dedication to rendering its strangeness, while revealing the political and cultural contradictions of its social organization. The body, in both of these texts, becomes the privileged site on which social categories are mapped. It is the entry point for both authors to self-reflexively engage in their writings and a literary trope representing the potential of radical resistance their texts exemplify.

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