

**Buried in the *Arkheia*: Writing the Female Infant into Being**  
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One of the first comprehensive official documents on female infanticide in India was an epistolary communication by Col. Walker, the Resident of Baroda, in 1808. While there had been some enquiry into the matter in the late eighteenth century, Walker's document was among the first communiqués to merit serious attention. Structured as an exposé of the crime among a particular group of Rajputs, the Jahrejahs, he set out to uncover evidence of the crime within the group – the existence of the crime itself was not in doubt. In his opening sentences of the letter, where he establishes the aim of the work, Walker declares, "I shall endeavour to ascertain the Origin and History of a Practice, the most barbarous that ever owed its existence either to the Wickedness, or Weakness of human nature."<sup>1</sup> The subtext of this sweeping declaration appears to state that the practice exists and has a discernible origin as well as history, but merely needs someone to uncover it and bring it all together into a cohesive narrative. His conclusions, drawn as they are from observations, occasional interactions, and even more occasional native testimonies, mark our initial foray into an archival investigation into the crime.

At its very outset, however, his report does not discuss female infanticide alone. Rather, in its magisterial sweep, it includes the right to delve into the customs and history of the natives in general. And yet, as Walker clarifies early on in his writing, he doesn't necessarily *know* the motives of the Jahrejahs despite his meticulous detailing of *all* the motives that they may entertain – religious, political, economic, and cultural. He does, nevertheless, draw a conclusion that might well be the tipping point in terms of facilitating British intervention –: infanticide has little or nothing to do with religion:

The forms and maxims and all the religious tenets of the Hindus are strongly opposed to the crime of Infanticide.  
Whatever may have been the motives that led the Jahrejas to [employ] the extraordinary practice of destroying their daughters, conveniency and policy have contributed to continue and extend it.<sup>2</sup>

The mythic origin and history of the practice that the Jahrejahs furnish, in itself an "inadequate and unsatisfactory account," become immaterial in light of the current motives of "conveniency and policy" behind the practice. In fact, he appears to implicitly advocate a disregard for the establishment of the motives behind the crime, thereby suggesting the impossibility of tracing the historical development of the practice – if, indeed, it has one.

Walker's depiction of the Jahrejahs' history of infanticide constructs it as unfamiliar, strange, non-chronological, and – within a European framework of historical understanding – completely unrecognizable. Multiple rhetorical accounts deny primacy to any one conception of the "true" origin of the heinous crime, but they also reject the focused, stagist strand of historical development; instead, the parallel narratives throw the past into a chaotic mixture of diverse origins. The various facets of human existence – the religious, the economic, the political, the cultural – do not coalesce in the furthering of a

single, narrativizable understanding but exist as independent histories, each asserting its own sway and weaving its own reality. If the different strands fuse together into a cohesive narrative in colonial India at all, it is only in the notion and performance of criminality that they can blend together. The question of “criminality” and of the “criminal” becomes complicated in the nineteenth-century examination of female infanticide. While female infanticide was referred to as a “crime,” there was significantly more hesitation in describing the criminality of the crime, paradoxical though it may sound. Establishing criminality would necessitate a retributive and judicial form of punishment, which the British shied away from until the 1860s. As we will explore shortly, references to female infanticide as a “crime” were used interchangeably with “custom” or “practice.” Depending on the perspective with which one analyzes this conflation, we might be able to point to the criminalizing of native customs and practices. But encapsulating the act into a more sedate conception of “practice” might also have served to mitigate the violence and horror of infanticide. Either way, this raises questions into how one formulates the boundaries of a “crime” versus those of a barbarous “custom.” Does a crime revolve specifically on an act? And if so, should the punishment for the act take into consideration its historical continuity? In other words, to what extent might an alleged mythic origin of female infanticide complicate the boundaries between crime and tradition?

To the extent that castes, tribes, or clans were recast discursively as indicative categories of the practice of daughter-murder – whereby almost all families of a particular group would purportedly follow this tradition – infanticide traces its origin to a legend about one of the earliest Rajput leaders.<sup>3</sup> In contradistinction to this legend-turned-prescription, Walker provides a more political explanation for the origin of infanticide among the Jahrejah Rajputs, suggesting that they began murdering their infant daughters to avoid the humiliation of marrying them with those Rajputs in Sind who had converted to Islam. Thus, by murdering their daughters in infancy, the Jahrejahs avoided the humiliation of having the girls remain celibate, as well as forestalled the risk of sending their daughters to other countries where they might at least marry Rajputs of “proper descent.”<sup>4</sup> At some point, he adds, the “policy of their chief may have either concurred in, or invented, the delusive responsibility of the Raj-Gor.” It is this ‘invention’ of the “delusive responsibility of the Raj-Gor” that is of interest to me. According to the legend, a Jahrejah chieftain asked his Raj-Gor or family Brahmin to find suitable husbands for his daughters. The Raj-Gor searched far and wide but was unable to find anyone worthy enough to become the Chieftain’s son-in-law. The inability to find a “worthy” groom forms the defining moment of the story and sets into motion the chain of events that culminates in the death of the infant. James Peggs, a missionary in Cuttack, quotes a “native of Mandavee” who furnishes the tale of the origin of the practice. In the native’s narration, the Raj-Gor claims that

since to retain these, your female offspring, in the family house, after their arriving at the age of womanhood, is contrary to the rules of religion, I will take them with me, and will burn them in the fire, on condition that it be stipulated on your part, to destroy, at their birth, all issue of the same sex that shall be born in your family. I now lay my solemn malediction, both here and hereafter, on you and yours, if you fail to perform the same; in such manner, that if you shall preserve any of your future daughters, they shall pass their lives in penury and want; nor shall good attend the father or mother of such children. It is further reported that...whenever a daughter is born, they [the Jahrejah tribes] put these helpless babes, without compassion, to death; without allowing their surviving for the shortest space [...] from the effect of the malediction pronounced, no good ensues from their preservation; insomuch that if any daughters of this tribe get married into other houses, the grain in such houses becomes less plentiful; nor do such women produce sons, but are the occasion of feuds arising in the families into which they are thus transplanted!<sup>5</sup>

The oral transmission of the legend from one generation to the next, within and among the communities of Rajputs confers a certain immediacy and newness to the practice. If, on the one hand, the practice of

female infanticide gains the status of a ritual by virtue of its ancient origins, its immediate availability to memory allows it to masquerade as a testimonial – the narrator testifies to the authenticity of the tale because the act of narration itself makes him a witness. Through his recounting of the legend, the narrator becomes the Raj-Gor and assumes the authority of laying the “solemn malediction” on the Chieftain. He moves seamlessly between the imagined past and the present moment of testimony. And it is in that moment of revivification of the past that the differential temporal spaces of the past and the present fuse together and become indistinct. The circulation of the same testimony among all raconteurs now suspends the community itself from linear time to relegate it within a pattern of ceaseless circularity.

The mythic and mythical features of the origin of the crime constitute an indirect challenge to any attempt to fix the crime in the gap between the struggle for territorial domination and the consequent injury to masculine pride. Through an almost deliberative forgetting, the legend also marks the substitution of a feared possibility – giving away their daughters to the Muslim invaders – with an event – the murder of the daughters because of the want of grooms. My description of the origin of female infanticide as an event follows from Ricœur’s emphasis on the “event” as the “actual referent of testimony taken as the first category of archived memory.”<sup>6</sup> Evading a debate about whether the event actually took place or was constructed in the collective imagination, I am pointing rather to its persistence in collective memory as indicative of historicity. To concur with Ricœur, “the event in its most primitive sense is that about which someone testifies.”<sup>7</sup> The boundaries of reality and of “what actually happened” are intimately entwined with remembering the event as it happened. The Mandavee narrator’s testimony draws the originary injunction into the moment of re-presentation, thereby preserving its present-ness and influence.

To combat this panopticistic self-disciplinary quotient, the British attempted to wean Jahrejeh Rajputs away from practising infanticide by incorporating the authority of the written word – the purported injunctions against infanticide in sacred texts.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, writing itself signifies prohibition and restriction through a literal inscribing of the law in language. However, the written word competes with the authority of the spoken word – that of the Raj-Gor and of the Chieftain – where the command itself becomes a *pre-text* that authorizes the murder of female infants. In the dialectic between the spoken word and the written form, between orality and transcription, translation intervenes to create a third discourse. It constructs the invisible speaking subject who does not speak by attributing words to him that are not his own. But this ventriloquism also inadvertently levels the imbalance of power such that the disdained figure of the Raj-Gor embodies authority, putting him on an even interactional field with the British.

With the unassailable patriarchal command firmly in place, the murder that was committed to couch the shame of having an unmarried daughter in the house moves beyond the particular to become prescriptive. The daughter must now be murdered to *prevent* any misfortune befalling her family. The transitive gap between the murder of an unmarried daughter and the murder of all daughters invites various readings and interpretations to complete the missing piece of the puzzle. The focus on the absence of the infants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggests that the command to not rear a single daughter can be explained by the shame that an unmarried daughter brings upon her father and consequently, the shame that all daughters can potentially bring upon their families. The mere presence of the girl embodies a potent threat to the family’s honour, to the patriarch’s honour, to masculine honour, and, thus, a threat to virility itself.<sup>9</sup> Her birth is a defiance of the religious/paternal interdiction that sanctions only her death, not her birth. Each meditation on the practice of infanticide is now drawn inevitably to filling that transitive gap between the murder of a daughter and the subsequent murder of all daughters. However, the gap, like the silence surrounding the birth and death of the female infant, represents the space of the untranslatable. It resists signification and any seamless continuity between the particular and the general. The plethora of explanations proffered by the British in the nineteenth century betrays their uneasiness over that gap. The untranslatable suggests the refusal of absolute knowingness, the inability of the British to read the Other and to know the Other in his/its Otherness.

To know the Other is to know the Self in relation to the Other. Lacunae in that knowingness force the colonial power to confront the vulnerability of its rule and make evident the extent of its administrative reach. The failure to *know* the Rajputs was a testament to the limits of absolute domination and revealed the fissures in the interpellation and constitution of colonial subjectivity. The British had to conceal the unstable categories of dominant-submissive and colonizer-colonized with a relatively unyielding epistemological construction of the suspected infanticidal Rajput. In Walker's letter, that construction is framed within the confines of binding customs and barbarous practices.

Walker prefaces his account of this history of infanticide by stating that "the early customs and History of every people are obscure and fabulous."<sup>10</sup> Although his sceptical rationality leads him to reject the popular mythic explanation in favour of a more pragmatic political or economic justification, the multiplicity of the narratives per se reject any monist conception of reality. The truth of the practice resides not only in the performance itself, but also in the discursive denouement of each of these (hi)stories. Walker's mediation of the competing accounts leads him to chart the origin and ensuing adherence to the practice through a history of the absence of affect. To the plethora of historical narratives, his own counter-narrative of history traces a single and singular "origin" and "practice" through barbarity and callousness. The non-affective history is a non-history, the negative trace of an imposed historical model. It at once relegates the colonized within the bounds of emotionality alone – even if that emotionality can only be evoked in its absence – and reserves the promulgation of rational judgment for the British observer. In addition, the persistence of the affective composition over a number of centuries fixes the subject-peoples in a recurring temporality through the denial of chronological sequentiality. Their practices remain congealed in time, still reflecting the "early customs and History of every people."<sup>11</sup> Colonialist intervention thus confers the gift of temporality, of progress, of development, indeed, of history. Imperialist discourse recasts a *sense* of history in the European post-Enlightenment understanding of the term. But can the circular peg of the performative repetition of infanticide fit into a linear crevice of temporality and history?

The rearrangement of a cultural praxis into an already existing methodological and interpretive paradigm is not necessarily available for a complete translation. The gaps in attempting to establish seamless historical continuity from the origins of the practice to its contemporary enactment are indicative of a larger failure in recasting cultural particularities within a universal idiom. In that (mis)translation that also gets recapitulated into the realm of the untranslatable, the Jahrejah Rajput in his alterity is divested of any claims to History, except that which the British official can allot to him through the literal inscription of his-story into writing and as part of the colonial archive. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Derrida speaks of the question of the archive as "a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow."<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, Carolyn Steedman has read the "desire for the archive" in *Archive Fever* as part of the "desire to find, or locate, or possess that moment of origin, as the beginning of things."<sup>13</sup> What gets elided in this simultaneous forward and backward meditation is the relation of the archive to the present. Cognizant of the tensions inherent in this temporality, Derrida adds that "it is a question of this performative to come whose archive no longer has any relation to the record of what is, to the record of the presence of what is or will have been *actually* present."<sup>14</sup> The absence of any relation to the record of "what is" is contingent upon the unknowability of the future. However, the archive of the colonial government seemingly moves away or resolves this tension by not only recording information but also anticipating the future through it. The record is as much an account of the present as it is an indicator of the future.

The resolution of the present with the future and, subsequently, of the future with the past contrasts sharply with the various co-existing and contradictory narratives of the origin of the practice. The refusal to search for the historical origin or "truth" – encapsulated in a microcosm in Walker's own preference to engage with the present customs and behaviour of the Jahrejahs despite his averred claim to trace the "origin and history" of the practice – is a refusal of legend as history, of orality as history, of speech as

history, and of the performative moment as history. History here does become the record of the British official, “hi(s)tory,” which dismisses other narratives and other voices to continue marking out its own pattern or cord. But his juxtaposition of “origin” and “history” can also be seen as an attempt to resolve the tension between the etymological and the ahistorical. The seeming absence of linear history competes with the iterative performances of female infanticide, all of which purportedly trace their source in one historico-mythical act. It is not the status of the legend qua myth that is in question, but rather its permanence and its accessibility to memory which characterizes the past or the origin as threatening. The presence of the past, its disguise as “present” through performance further contributes to the supposed rejection of linearity in favour of the repetitious, unchanging moment.

Custom, practice, crime – the association of meanings and the seemingly neat division into British/rational/writing on the one hand and Indian/affective/oral on the other is scrambled with the emergence of various contradictions in Walker’s narrative. In offering merely a plethora of motives behind the crime of infanticide without revealing the historical trajectory of the practice, Walker appears to intimate the ahistoricity of the Jahrejah Rajputs, an inference he soon retracts, however, in alluding to their “Ancient History” in Sind prior to its conquest by the invading army:

According to the Ancient History of the Jahrejas, their first considerable and well ascertained estatement (sic) was in Scind; but by traditional accounts there is reason to believe, that they at one period extended under different denominations over a great [part] of Persia [...]

The History of the Jahrejas also since they arrived in Kutch and Guzerat, bears evidence of their incapacity for Government, and of their capricious and imprudent conduct.

It is necessary to mention these traits in the characters of the Jahrejas, as they would operate to maintain the practice of Infanticide, after their settlement in the Country; and when the original pretence for its origin ceased to exist.<sup>15</sup>

The History of the Jahrejah Rajputs as a “race” doesn’t extend to their cultural practices as a nation. Any historical claim that the practice of infanticide generates is a false one since it can only be constitutive of an immutable, unchanging “trait.” At the same time, in writing the history of infanticide, Walker’s imposition of linearity is itself marred by similar discontinuities. Unable to translate the praxis into a seamless and continual narrative, the ruptures in the testimonies and observations and the silences that the gaps in memory embody penetrate into Walker’s writing as he vacillates between acknowledging the history of the Jahrejahs and denying any presumed tradition of infanticide.

Fraught though it might be with the tensions inherent in the juxtaposition of dualities, Walker’s report, in many ways, symbolizes an ideal for later administrators. The engagement with the question of infanticide assumes changing modes of knowingness that in rendering the native visible and transparent, nevertheless covers its own panopticistic and voyeuristic tracks. The narrative shifts from an intellectual and historical contemplation (“I shall endeavour to ascertain the Origin and History of a Practice...”) to a voyeuristic witnessing (“Curiosity will naturally be excited to learn the forms, and methods, observed in committing these Infanticides...”), while also including in its gamut translations of native perceptions, Sanskrit verses condemning the practice, confessions (“...the Jahrejahs spoke freely of the custom of putting their daughters to death, and without delicacy and without any pain...”), and a general and inexplicable knowingness. The gaze of the official moves beyond the limited scope of an eyewitness account to penetrate the psyche of the native. He observes even that which is concealed from the curious and prying eyes of the British traveller. By occupying this more privileged position, Walker’s report functions as the bridge that links the visual, scopic, and active narrative of the travel journal with the aural, passive transcription of a confession or translation. His mediation of these two modalities of recording inflects the vectorial thrust of the nineteenth-century archive, such as in this paradigmatic exemplar of the scene of the crime that he provides:

The following is the translate (sic) of the Memorandum from Wassonjee Eswarjee, a Nagur Braman, who attended the camp in the quality of Vakeel from the Gondul Chief.

‘When the wives of the Jahrejah RajPutes are delivered of Daughters, the women who may be with the Mother repair to the Oldest man in the House, this person desires them to go to him, who is the father of the Infant, and do as he directs.

On this the women go to the father, who desires them to do as is customary, and so to inform the Mother.

The women then repair to the Mother, and tell her to act in conformity to their usages. The Mother next puts opium on the Nipple of her Breast, which the child inhaling with its Milk, dies.

The above is one custom and the following is another. When the child is born, they place the Navel string on its Mouth, when it expires.’

The testimonial derives its authority precisely from the multiple layers of translation, as well as from the doubling of the listener/speaker. Wassonjee Eswarjee’s dual positionality allows him at once to be privy to the intimate lives of the natives while simultaneously allying him closer to the British by virtue of his being a trusted agent (“vakeel”<sup>16</sup>). In the daily exercise of colonial power, the endurance of this record/memorandum/confession demonstrates the epistemological effacement of the originary voice in favour of linguistic and discursive interpretation. The exercise of hermeneutic authority, however, constitutes its own limitations; each mode of translation and interpretation diminishes its own authenticity by subsequently necessitating and engendering yet another interpretation. The historical “truth” of the practice thus falls in the interstitial crevice of multiple translations, constantly distorting and mutating its own reality to never truly reveal itself but in the visual register of the performance. The practice of female infanticide appears to need no clarification; Eswarjee’s elliptical elucidation sheds no new light on the subject apart from adding yet another voice to the unisonance against the practice.

Walker’s own addendum to Eswarjee’s memorandum reveals his familiarity with the *modus operandi* of the act. The untrustworthiness of the native intermediary qua informant is brought to light as Walker fills the gaps in Eswarjee’s narrative and becomes the translator in his own turn:

They appear to have several methods of destroying the Infant but two are prevalent.

Immediately after the birth of a female they put into its mouth some opium, or draw the umbilical Cord over its face, which prevents respiration.

But the destruction of so tender and young a subject is not difficult, and it is effected without a struggle, and probably without pain.

The natural weakness and debility of the Infant, when neglected and left uncleaned, sometimes causes its death, without the necessity of actual violence and sometimes it is laid on the ground or on a plank, and left to expire.

These accounts I learn in conversation with Jahrejahs, and prefer them to the information of the translated Memorandum.

The Infant after it is destroyed is placed in a small Basket entirely naked, & in this state carried out and interred. In Kattywar any of the female attendants of the family perform this office; but in Kutch it is done by the domestic RajGor.

Wassonjee Eswarjee’s memorandum is now summarily dismissed as furnishing any “true” representation of the practice among the Jahrejahs. The unreliability of the native informant is thereby reinforced, and the dismissal also exposes the undependability and flimsiness of translations. However, the written record of these translations / transliterations is essential in soliciting the “authentic” native perception and in understanding the native’s ontological construction of himself. But the thrust of Walker’s inquiry is aimed more at the discovery of the crime and its methods.<sup>17</sup> He rejects Eswarjee’s cultural translation of Jahrejah practices in favour of his own quest for the “true” or originary voice. It is now his doubling as listener/speaker that is cast as more trustworthy. Within that contextual framework, Walker mimics the

Derridean *archon* as he embodies the force of religious and judicial order, albeit at an interpersonal and intersubjective level. The seamlessness with which he shifts positionalities and modalities – between observer and interpreter, or between transcription and translation – grants his narrative the stature of “truth” and “reality.”

He implicitly acknowledges the oral testimony to be more authentic than the written one. For Col. Walker, the “truth” of infant murder resides in speech more than in silence and even more than in the written word, which allows him to now dismiss Eswarjee’s account of the elaborate, albeit silent, ritual performance. His own account of infanticide masquerades as the more authoritative version of the practice; while both Eswarjee’s and Walker’s narratives have the force of observation that is fixed in writing, Walker’s description contains the added sheen of an oral testimony that is present in the text even without being transcribed. At the same time, the Jahrejhs’ presumed avowal of the practice itself becomes authentic because it now has the weight of the British official’s cultural translation that can vouch for it. Walter Benjamin defines the “task” of the translator as arriving at the “intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original.”<sup>18</sup> In drawing our attention to the vivid skeletal framework of Eswarjee’s memorandum and to the shocking and alienating command of the Jahrejah father, the translation succeeds in maintaining the foreignness of form and of content. However, the various seams of narratives interweave here to demystify the search for an “original” voice or narrative. By omitting his source(s), Walker becomes both the author and the narrator. The testimonial, voiced in the commanding recounting of the colonial official, thus gets an additional layer of legitimacy. The authority of the native *voice* is assembled from the superimposition of narratives – in this case, those of the Jahrejah Rajputs and Eswarjee. The similarity in the epistemological construction of the crime across “all” Jahrejah families implicates consensus through the trope of synechdochal proof. The narrative turns the spotlight to the enactment of the unfeeling moment, with the result that the conversations that transpire within the Jahrejah family prior to the murder being committed seem almost unimportant.

In addition, however, the testimonials also have to assert their difference, their foreignness in order to lay claim to a “true representation” or “historical fact.” Lawrence Venuti observes that translation as a medium is often implicated in subject-formation, in so far as it involves a process of familiarizing domestic subjects with a foreign text by emphasizing values in that text that also enjoy “authority” in the domestic culture, by the choice of the text, and by specific discursive mechanisms. He adds that a text can, thus, successfully engage in the task of forming subjecthood through, using Goethe’s term, “mirroring,” or a more narcissistic “self-recognition.”<sup>19</sup> Archival translations, however, have to fulfil a different project because they are meant specifically for a particular demographic within the domestic audience – the British Parliament – but are geared predominantly towards an expatriate, biased, and invested reader. The narrative structure, the values evoked, and the particular issues dealt with are thus engineered to reify the foreignness and unfamiliarity while simultaneously rendering the text intelligible.<sup>20</sup> By having the focus on the intermediary and not on the speaker, the translation deliberately constructs the speaker as a faceless entity, whose anonymity implies a certain unisonance. His own secret confession echoes that of the community as a whole. In constructing the perpetrator of the crime as “the Jahrejah male,” Walker reifies caste boundaries, characteristics, identifications, and identity. The problem automatically shifts from a question of finding individual perpetrators to a question of guilty tribes, castes, or communities.

Indeed, it is in this shift from the individual to the communal that the metonymic slippage between crime and custom becomes crucial. Col. Walker’s letter informs us that the prevalence of female infanticide among the Jahrejah Rajputs was a “practice” and a “custom” that had persisted unchecked for centuries. Even when, in later legislative documents, the murder of female infants is referred to as a “crime,” the notion of criminality was still rooted strongly in its genus as a “custom” and a norm and could not be dissociated from those moorings. Walker’s delineation is prophetic in establishing “custom” as the prism

through which all other explanations of the crime are viewed. The repetition of the crime, hypergamous marriages, dowry, wedding expenses, and so on can all be traced to the understanding of infanticide as a custom. Even potentially unrelated hypotheses, such as caste pride and the cultural devaluation of females, do not arise in a vacuum but are interlocked with the other explanations. Steering clear of any overt charges or accusations of murder, the British were able to unassumingly intervene in domestic affairs through the deceptive insistence on custom.

And yet, despite the criminalizing of “custom” rather than its practitioners, a subtext of collective barbarity and cruelty runs through the apparent exoneration of the infanticidal Rajputs from guilt. By designating female infanticide as a “custom,” the British, whether consciously or not, allude to the murder of infants as a *habit*<sup>21</sup> and divorce it from its historical development. In thinking of the killing of newborn infants as a custom or a practice, the narratives surreptitiously underline the callous nature of both the murder and the murderers. Moreover, they also depict the natives as slaves to habit, blindly engaging in a repetitious cycle of murder because they are accustomed to it and incapable of initiating change in the pattern or, rather, lacking the will to initiate change. When viewed in conjunction with Walker’s dismissal of the legendary origins of the crime, the tag “custom” or “practice” has the impact of dehistoricizing the group and relegates them once again in a ceaseless circularity. More strategically, perhaps, it reaffirms the merciless and cruel nature of the murder, while simultaneously allowing the British to refrain from directly accusing the martial Rajputs of murder.

In teasing out the semantic nuance of the word “custom” as “habit” rather than “tradition,” I want to draw attention to the layers of meaning that a particular choice of word hides or reveals. Despite occasional and stray references, female infanticide is almost never stated as a “ritual” or “tradition.” Might that have been a deliberate omission on the part of the British? What is at stake when we refuse to acknowledge the ritualistic aspects and origins of a tradition? Indeed, what is at stake when we refuse to examine an event as part of a larger tradition? The “tradition” of infanticide comprises of a mimicking which circulates within a culture of orality and enters into the performative sphere. The availability of the legend to memory and the acceptability of infant murder are carried across from one generation to the next. Female infanticide as ritual is transmitted through imitation, and it is this play-upon-a-play that Eswarjee’s evocative and visual, though silent, exemplar highlights. But the act escapes parodying itself by moving beyond a repetition-in-stasis or mere duplication. The aporia between the historical trajectory inherent in a tradition and the cyclical repetition of the act of murder itself is resolved through a process of translation. In that sense, female infanticide is not simply a *tr\_diti\_* or a transmittal through a lineage. Instead, it might be more productively structured in terms of the German *übersetzen*, where the tradition is not only carried across but also undergoes an act of translation and interpretation. The retelling of the myth and the performance of the ritual entail a decoding and recoding of the tradition where it has to be contextualized within a different “emplotment,”<sup>22</sup> to use Hayden White’s term. This *übersetzung* destabilizes meaning by displacing it from the centre and repackaging it in each successive generation. Identities, plots, and scenarios are in constant flux, which hinders any easy identification of cause or culprit. The origin of female infanticide shifts form in the narrations of its different raconteurs; the method of the crime refuses to be constant as it incorporates various degrees of violence and secrecy; the parents, servants, and midwives all seem to play the role of the murderer; the motive for murder is never the same, not only among the different families in the community but within a family itself.

It appears more dangerous to construct the crime as a “tradition,” with all its shape-shifting connotations, than as a barbarous custom, which is itself a metonymic slide into a more unidimensional portrayal. To accept it as a tradition would have meant not only having to concede the historicity of the ritual, but also to accept it as ritual, which, in turn, would require the British to engage with its quasi-religious dimensions. The preference for the term “custom,” on the other hand, afforded the British an opportunity to test the viability of the moral pedagogy on a barbaric people and encroach on the private lives of the natives. Crucially, the association of ‘custom’ with ‘habit’ suggested, using an inverse reasoning, that



there were missing girls waiting to be found and, thus, customs to be broken, thereby proving not only the predominance of the habit but also the justification for the colonial machine of surveillance and detection to be set into motion.

But while the insistence on detection insinuated an already established existence of the crime among particular communities or within particular districts, it also concealed a growing anxiety of the British, viz., the inability to locate the murdered infants' bodies. Female infanticide was perhaps the only horrific practice whose horror had to be imagined and constructed from a ubiquitous absence or emptiness. Even though there were few witnesses to the act of infanticide and the practice necessitated an absence of spectacle, descriptions of the means of killing the infant abound in the records of the British government. The female infant was never simply murdered but strangled or suffocated with the umbilical cord, given opium, left alone to cry herself to death, after which she was finally put into an earthen pot and buried, or "thrown into the river or jungle, where the jackals and vermin soon destroy[ed] all trace of the *corpus delecti*."<sup>23</sup> The death, the violence, the corpse were all simultaneously sucked into and drawn out of a black hole of nothingness and of signification.

James Peggs quotes from the first volume of Parliamentary Papers in England in 1824 on the matter of female infanticide, contrasting the silence at the daughter's birth with the joy and enthusiasm to mark the birth of a son:

Should any inquisitive person ask a Jahrejah the result of the pregnancy of his wife, if it were a female, he would answer '*nothing*'; and this expression, in the idiom of the country, is sufficiently significant. [...] The death of a daughter is generally viewed by a Jahrejah as an infallible consequence after its birth; and it is considered to be an event of such insignificance that he is seldom apprized of it! The occurrence excites neither surprise nor enquiry: and is never made a subject even of conversation. It is attended by no ceremony, and publicity is avoided.<sup>24</sup>

The oral testimonials quoted in the Parliamentary Papers – which are, in turn, taken from Walker's report – allude to shame at the birth of a daughter: a shame that warrants absence of publicity and discussion. Giving birth to a female is equated with giving birth to a still-born; the father needn't be notified because the birth of a daughter was considered a non-birth – it was "nothing." My own reading and interpretation of that "nothing" follows from Lacan's reference to the Sanskrit poetic theory of *dhvani*,<sup>25</sup> which, among its different meanings like "sound" and "tone," also signifies "suggestion" or "allusion." The metaphoric and metonymic layers of connotation here insinuate the other negative meanings of "nobody," "still-born," "neither a birth nor a death," "not a son." Nevertheless, the "insignificance" of the birth implicates the commonality of the crime, while simultaneously disbanding any notion of guilt or shame on the part of the parent.

The absence of the infant, as encapsulated in the "nothing," paradoxically emphasizes her *presence* in discourse and underlines the practice as the taking away of life, rather than negating the violence through nothingness. Peggs' claim that the father was rarely informed of the birth thus reveals a hidden belief that one cannot kill what never existed: the Rajputs don't conceive of the practice as murder since a non-birth can only engender a non-death. Our very allusion to her death and to her negation suggests a presence that is then obliterated. But if she never existed to begin with – if her birth was a "non-birth" – she cannot be constituted as an *a priori* presence. Her non-existence does not bring into focus what was once alive and now is not. On the contrary, the visibility of the adults and of young boys, the presence of her "others" raises questions about what is missing from the picture and *should* be there. The non-birth that results in a non-death signifies the presence of the infant only as a negative presence. It is a performative negation that fills the void and personifies itself through various dichotomies: the play of visibility-invisibility; the hushed silence of the women and the nonchalance of the men; the quantifying, querying zeal of the British officials and the secrecy and subterfuge of the Rajput men.

An examination of female infanticide across nearly two centuries can only locate and fix the infant in her absence. It is that disembodiment that is being archived, not the infant herself. To read the archive in relation to female infanticide is also to read the female body as archive. The body now documents for its readers signs of violence, apathy, misogyny, and greed. But it also denies full disclosure by locating its own “truth” elsewhere except in its own invisible body. Because the bodies of these infants were rarely, if ever, recovered, the kind of violence that was wreaked upon them might never be known. An infant that dies from being neglected embodies proof that it was never wanted, but the mutilated body of a newborn that was strangled or beaten reveals marks of a different cruelty. How might we account for these varying forms of violence? By structuring the death of the infant as a non-birth, the very conception of loss resists signification. Each death enacts the mythic origin of infanticide; it becomes a representation and a re-presentation of that originary loss, thereby entering the ritual performance of a scripted play and distancing itself from the violence and horror of the act. The ‘nothingness’ of the female infant, echoed in the absence of her body and the absence of affect surrounding her murder, can only be undone in the archives through an insistence on her displacement from a colonial accounting. A fantasy of detection and containment is operational here, which counters her tripartite absence on the physical, affective, and discursive plane. The absent female infant is written into presence as she gets signified through rumour, suspicion, and statistics, her textuality preserved and contained with the archival records and, indeed, in the archive itself – buried in the *arkheia*.

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 NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Colonel Walker’s report on infanticide in Baroda state and measures adopted by the Baroda state (pp. 3940-4146) [written in Baroda on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1808]. Secret and Political Department. Diary no. 228, 1808, dated Bombay Castle, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1808.

<sup>2</sup> Walker’s report.

<sup>3</sup> There are various legends circulating among the different groups suspected of engaging in the practice, and it would be beyond the scope of this article to account for the different narratological strands. Continuing with the focus on the Jahrejahs, I am examining the legends of interest to and concerning the Rajputs, especially since these legends received greater attention from Col. Walker and other officials who used his letter as the point of departure for their own speculations. Veena Talwar Oldenburg’s analysis of female infanticide in colonial Punjab includes the following legend that the British believed was the origin of the crime among a sub-caste of the Khatri called the Bedis and that is quoted in the reports of Major Edwardes (*Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime* [New York: Oxford UP, 2002], 50):

Dharam Chand Bedi, the grandson of Guru Nanak (1469-1538, the founder of the Sikh faith), had two sons and a daughter. The latter was betrothed to a Khatri boy, but on the day of the nuptials the bride’s family suffered a deep affront by the groom’s family. The groom’s party insisted that the doorway of the house be widened, and destroyed it by force to allow the groom’s litter to pass through. ‘The incensed Bedee prayed ‘that the threshold of the Khuttree tribe might in like manner be ruined’ and the nuptial rites were celebrated amid mutual ill-feeling. Finally, when the bride’s brothers accompanied the groom’s party to bid their sister farewell, ‘the weather was hot and the party took a malicious pleasure in taking the young Bedees further than etiquette required.’ The boys returned, footsore and weary, and it was then that the enraged Dharam Chand,

indignant at all the insults that the bridal of his daughter had drawn upon him from an *inferior class*, laid the inhuman injunction on his descendents, that ‘in future no Bedee should let a daughter live.’ The boys were horror-stricken at so un-natural a law, and with clasped hands represented to their father, that to take the life of a child was one of the greatest sins in the shastras. But Dhurm Chund replied, ‘that if the Bedees remained true to their faith and abstained from lies and strong drink, providence would reward them with none but male children. But at any rate, let the burden of the crime be upon his neck, and no one else’s,’ and from that time forth

Dhurm Chund's head fell forward upon his chest and he evermore walked like one who bore an awful weight upon his shoulders.

[...] With 'consciences thus relieved,' the 'race' of Bedis 'continued for 300 years to murder their infant daughters, and if any Bedee out of natural feeling, preserved a girl, he was excommunicated by the rest, and treated as a common sweeper.'"

<sup>4</sup> Walker's hypothesis has already been dismissed by Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar, Renu Dube, and Reena Dube, who point out that intermarriage between Jahreja Rajputs and Muslims was not uncommon in Kutch and Kathiawar. See their *Female Infanticide in India: A Feminist Cultural History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Peggs, *Cries of Agony: An Historical Account of Suttee, Infanticide, Ghat Murders and Slavery in India* (Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 1984), 133-135.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 180. Ricœur discusses the "event" as the "ultimate referent" of "historical discourse," and brings a distinction between "the fact as 'something said,' the 'what' of historical discourse, from the event as 'what one talks about,' the 'subject of...' that makes up historical discourse" (179).

<sup>7</sup> Ricœur, 180.

<sup>8</sup> In contradistinction to the period leading up to the abolition of *Sati* in 1829 – when the British verified the religious sanctioning of the practice by consulting Hindu priests (See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "History" [*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*]) – far less textual support was mobilized to demonstrate that infanticide was considered a sin in Hinduism. Indeed, as Walker confidently declares in 1808, "The forms and maxims and all the religious tenets of the Hindus are strongly opposed to the crime of Infanticide."

<sup>9</sup> Here, I am referring to the economic burden, social exclusion, and cultural shame that her birth appears to embody. While an argument can undoubtedly be put forth that the greatest threat of emasculation lies in her sexuality and that the above three factors are reducible to the perception of her sexuality as dangerous or deviant, I am more interested in engaging with the vacillations and the substitutions between the economic and the social and their relationship to the sacred. For an exploration of the perceptions of female sexuality, refer to Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kali; The Laws of Manu*, trans. Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith; T.G. Vaidyanathan and Jeffrey J. Kripal (eds.), *Vishnu on Freud's Desk: A Reader in Psychoanalysis and Hinduism*, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Walker's report

<sup>11</sup> Walker's report.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2002), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, 72.

<sup>15</sup> Walker's report.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard S. Cohn describes "vakeels" as "confidential agents who, like the Akhunds, were frequently involved in negotiations with Indian officials on courses of action in relation to the Company's continuing need to negotiate various legal and commercial matters with the Mughal state." *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1996), 17.

<sup>17</sup> In a detailed analysis of the British ploy of using dowry as the cause of a variety of crimes against women, Veena Talwar Oldenburg has shown how Walker was cautious about not "antagonizing powerful Rajput chieftains" (*Dowry Murder* 48). Keen to root out the truth while simultaneously maintaining political harmony, he sought instead to shame them into renouncing the practice.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed., Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 76.

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 77.

<sup>20</sup> As I write this, I am only too conscious of Tejaswini Niranjana's indictment of the "post-colonial desire to re-translate" as "linked to the desire to re-write history" ([*Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: UC Press, 1992] 172). And while my reading of 19<sup>th</sup> century India is, in fact, mediated through the lens of British writing of the period, I also believe that *any* reading of the past involves a re-visiting and – to cite Bhabha's use of the term – re-membering that is crucial in order to avoid a teleological conception of history. One can only "re-write" what has already been written and is now being erased and written over. My conception of history, however, mimics how I see translations at work in the archives: each "re-writing" of history adds yet another story, where it is the complex interplay of various synchronic layers

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articulated within a historical moment that necessitates the postcolonialist's engagement with the past, rather than the diachronicity of a particular narrative.

<sup>21</sup> I am referring here to the etymology of the term "custom" from the Latin *consu\_scere* – to grow accustomed to or to become accustomed.

<sup>22</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), 83.

<sup>23</sup> Home-Judicial. From W. Robinson, Esquire, C.S.I., Acting Third Member of the Board of Revenue, to the Hon'ble R.S.Ellis, C.B. Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, dated Chingleput, the 10<sup>th</sup> Febrary 1868, No.66.

<sup>24</sup> Peggs, 138-141.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1968), 58.