RESISTANCE, COMPLICITY AND TRANSCENDENCE
A Postcolonial Study of Vivekananda’s Mission in the West

by

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Abstract

In this study, I examine the figure of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a sanyassi who traveled to America, England, and France, becoming one of the first Hindus to articulate his religion in the West. I argue that Vivekananda’s spiritual mission can be seen as a critical engagement with the Orientalist essentialisations of his day in an effort to change the subordinate role of India in relation to the West. After a brief literature review, in chapter one I outline the discursive challenges which Vivekananda and his contemporaries faced through a Saidian examination of Orientalism in India. In chapter two, I explain how, in his presentation of India and Hinduism, Vivekananda used his rhetorical ingenuity and his physical person as a way to refute the Orientalist theses of India’s degeneracy and effeminacy, and offered a formulation of the Vedanta tradition with which he hoped to earn for India the status of respected spiritual teacher. In chapter three, I complicate matters by examining how Vivekananda was complicit in the Orientalist essentialisations which he wished to deny. His representation of himself and of Vedanta can be criticised in terms of his compromises to the expectations of his Western audience, his perpetuation of dichotomies such as spiritual/ material and feminine/ masculine, and in his essentialising approach to Hindu tradition. However, by the end of chapter three, I argue that Said’s examination of Orientalism is too narrow a lens to capture the complexity of Vivekananda’s life and endeavours. In chapter four, I draw on the work of Ashis Nandy and Homi Bhabha to argue that Vivekananda was neither an innocent victim nor a polemical manipulator of his circumstances, but by virtue of his liminal status between cultures, ultimately sought to transcend the discursive dichotomies in which he was often mired.
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### Abbreviations

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Introduction

On May 31, 1893, Swami Vivekananda\(^1\) a young sannyasi of the newly formed Ramakrishna order,\(^2\) left India to embark on a remarkable journey to America. He had a vague plan of attending that year’s World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, but had no invitation, no contacts in the West, and soon after his arrival, no money. However, due to a series of fortunate events coupled with Vivekananda’s considerable ingenuity, determination, and charm, his visit quickly grew into a mission of incredible influence and religious vision. His popularity at the World’s Parliament led to a series of lecture tours, and from 1893-1900 he spent all but two years teaching and traveling in America, England and France.\(^3\) These lectures addressed a variety of topics, ranging from pleas for India’s economic upliftment, to the proud espousal of Vedanta as universal philosophy which would unite all of mankind. Vivekananda’s time in the West\(^4\) was productive: he attracted several devotees from both continents; and established Vedanta centres in New York and San Francisco; making Vedanta the first Asian religious movement to find a permanent home in America (Jackson 1994, xi).

Although not philosophically radical, his articulation of Hinduism was a landmark in the history of Indian religion. The Vedanta he presented remains a foundational aspect of the Western notion of Hinduism (Koppedrayer 2004, 7), and went a long way in recreating India’s own religious and national self-perception (Dhar 1977, 144). Brekke argues that Vivekananda was instrumental in defining Hinduism as a ‘world religion’ to the West as well as in India. In his speeches, “religion emerged as a distinct object, Hinduism became

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\(^{1}\) His birth name was Narendranath Datta. For the remainder of this paper, I refer to him simply as Vivekananda, the monastic name he took in 1892, which translates as “he who has the bliss of spiritual discrimination” (Jackson 1994, 24).

\(^{2}\) Vivekananda became a sannyasi of the Ramakrishna monastic brotherhood in January, 1887, by performing the Vedic initiation rite of \textit{Viraja Hom} (Sil 1997, 49).

\(^{3}\) The chronology of his travels is as follows: July 1893 arrives in America; 1895 departs for England; 1897 returns to India; June 1899 returns to England; 1899 short trips to America and France; October 1900 boards the Orient Express in Paris bound for India (Sen 2000, 104-5).

\(^{4}\) Throughout this paper, I refer often to the category of ‘the West’ and occasionally to the category of ‘the East’. I do not wish to perpetuate the perception that these are homogenous or polarised entities; however, in an examination of the thought of Vivekananda, ‘the West’ is generally treated as conceptually coherent and often envisioned as oppositional to ‘the East’.
one religion among many, and the Hindu religion was individualised and cut loose from the specifically Indian context of caste” (2002, 39). Furthermore, through Vivekananda’s enthusiastic reception in the West, he was able to challenge popular misperceptions about India and Hinduism. In this study, I examine how Vivekananda’s spiritual mission to the West functioned as a critical engagement with contemporary pejorative discourses. Accepted as an intellectual equal and a spiritual superior by many Americans and British, I argue that Vivekananda used his rhetorical skills and physical person as a medium for the reformulation of the subordinate relationship of India to the West. However, I also assess the extent to which Vivekananda was complicit in the very discourses he sought to refute. Throughout this study, Vivekananda emerges as a culturally complex and intellectually composite figure, and is a salient example of the predicament of the colonial subject, who negotiates an ambiguous and liminal position between cultures.

The inequality which Vivekananda sought to alleviate was manifest explicitly in the history of British rule in India, and implicitly in contemporary discourses which posited irreconcilable differences between the two cultures. In the first chapter of this study, I explain how the 19th century Western perception of ‘the East’ was marked by a deep set of prejudices outlined by Edward Said in his seminal text, *Orientalism* (1978) and elaborated in the Indian context by Inden (1986; 1990), R. King (1999) as well as Said (1994). I refer to the ‘Orientalist discourse’, by which I mean a style of understanding and speaking about the relationship between the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ which assumes foundational and qualitative differences between these two regions. Orientalism can be summarised in the theses of the essential degeneracy, mysticism, irrationality and effeminacy of the East. Said and Inden posit that these modes of knowing the Orient are intimately bound up in the imperial relationship of colonial master and colonised subject; and that furthermore, through

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5 In *Orientalism*, Said focuses exclusively on Western perceptions of the Middle East. However, I argue that this does not mitigate the applicability of his study to other colonial and Eastern cultures. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Said extends his analysis to “a more general pattern of relationships between the modern metropolitan West and its overseas territories” (x). Following this broader critical scope, many scholars have successfully used
the textualisation and historical appropriation of Oriental religion, Orientalism
disenfranchised the indigenous subject of her ability to authentically represent her own
culture.

Orientalism is an important study which illuminates the relationship between
colonial discourse and power. However, Said fails to examine the possibility of indigenous
resistance to Orientalism. Such an oversight theoretically disallows Indians the agency to
create their own systems of meaning, a critique that has been made by Breckenridge and van
der Veer (1993). Although the foundations of the Orientalist discourse were powerful in
19th century India, many thinkers attempted to resist and invert their hegemony.

Vivekananda’s mission to the West can be seen as a remarkable incidence of an indigenous
subject taking an active role to refute Orientalist discourses. In chapter two, I examine his
lectures in the West, arguing that he used his public presence as a means to invert
Orientalist denigrations of India and Hinduism. Furthermore, he refuted the theses of
Western superiority by offering potent criticisms of Western culture, and explicitly linking
Christian missionaries with the corruption of colonial rule. Finally, in his presentation of the
Vedantic system, Vivekananda argued that India’s spiritual teachings were philosophically
superior and uniquely universalisable. Thus, Vivekananda sought to earn India the status of
respected teacher, rejecting the role of degenerate colonial subject.

Although Vivekananda’s presentation was a powerful effort to refute Orientalism,
his project has been criticised by Indian and Western religious leaders, as well as scholars.
In chapter three, I assess the extent to which Vivekananda appropriated Orientalist
essentialisations in an attempt to strengthen his discourse of the superiority of India. The
primary contemporary complaint levied against Vivekananda is summarised by R. King,
who argues that, because of his adoption of essentialising discourses, Vivekananda’s
religious message is an Orientalist stereotype (93). Although this critique has some merit in
examining the polemical nature of Vivekananda’s presentation of Vedanta, I find it to be

his framework to examine the Western relationship with other Eastern religious traditions such as Buddhism
seriously limited in a thorough appraisal of Vivekananda’s religious and intellectual heritage. King’s dismissal is only possible if Vivekananda is examined strictly from within the Orientalist discourse, ignoring the authenticity and indigeneity of his spiritual message. In an effort to correct this common scholarly bias, I examine the Indian context of Vivekananda’s thought, arguing that his religiosity was not simply polemical, and that even his essentialising tendencies have precedent outside the confines of the Orientalist discourse.

Having identified the limits of Orientalism in offering a thorough examination of Vivekananda, in chapter four I turn to subsequent postcolonial scholarship, which allows a more complex and active role for the colonial subject. The work of Ashis Nandy and Homi Bhabha examines the colonial subject as a hybrid figure occupying a bicultural space between culturally posited categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’. Envisioning Vivekananda as a liminal cultural agent allows for a new understanding of the discursive predicament in which he is caught. In transgressing not only the boundaries of culture, but also the dichotomies of the spiritual and material worlds, Vivekananda often experienced tensions related to his bicultural position. However, I argue that it was due to his situation between the East and West, the spiritual and the material, that the authenticity of Vivekananda’s religious message emerges. In the end, I suggest that his philosophy of Vedanta was the very medium with which he attempted to transcend the discursive dichotomies marking the world in which he lived.

This study can be seen to work simultaneously in three different ways. Firstly, it examines Vivekananda’s discursive relationship with the West in terms of his public presence and religious message. Secondly, it uses Vivekananda as a case study to illuminate the complex position of the colonial subject in the negotiation of Orientalist discourses. As such, it identifies the strengths and some limitations of Said’s study, and shows the necessity for subsequent postcolonial scholarship which has revised and expanded on

(Goldberg, 1999; King 1999, 143-160).
Orientalism in reference to the predicament of the Indian colonial subject. Lastly, my study responds to a discrepancy in Vivekananda scholarship which tends to either focus solely on his religious message, ignoring the extent to which he was influenced by political and cultural contingencies, or else discounts the authenticity of his spirituality by situating him merely in the Orientalist discourse. A more nuanced and comprehensive examination of Vivekananda emerges when I follow his example and attempt to transcend such dichotomous assessments of an ultimately hybrid reality.
Chapter 1. Academic and Historical Contexts

The Scholarship and the Subject

In order to situate my work amongst other Vivekananda scholarship, and define the specific aspects of Vivekananda’s life that I examine in this study, a brief review of literature is necessary. This review cannot claim to be complete due to limitations of space, as well as the fact that many writings on Vivekananda are inaccessible to me since they are published only in Bengali. The first thing of note about English Vivekananda scholarship is its vast diversity of emphases and perspectives. Accounts of Vivekananda’s life and mission are many, considering his importance in the Indian nationalist movement, as well as his influence in what has come to be called neo-Hinduism. Studies envision him alternatively as a deeply pious ascetic committed to the search for truth in the Hindu sannyasa tradition (Raychaudhuri 1988); as a spiritual visionary who foretold and campaigned for the dawn of a global religious consciousness beyond sectarian traditions (S. N. Chattopadhyay 2001); as a manipulator of Orientalist stereotypes to promote an evangelical and often self-glorifying agenda in the West (Brekke 2002; Sil 1997); as a socialist campaigner for the material well-being of India’s poor (Mazumdar 1972); and even as the spiritual father of an increasingly militant nationalism in South Asia (Shamita Basu 2002). None of the above interpretations is unfounded; Vivekananda’s 39 years of life were incredibly industrious in myriad ways, his writings prolific and often inconsistent, meaning that any authoritative assessment of his ultimate ‘meaning’ can be problematic.

Narasingha Sil’s examination of Vivekananda scholarship (2001) makes a useful distinction between two broad styles of inquiry: hagiographic and hermeneutic. Amongst

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6 I am indebted to works such as Raychaudhuri (1988) and Sil (1997), which render a great deal of these writings accessible to English readers.

7 The designation ‘neo-Hinduism’ is often used synonymously with other terms such as Hindu Modernism, and the Hindu (or Bengal) Renaissance. I prefer the former terminology, and my use of it follows that of Halbfass (1988). Halbfass traces this term’s emergence to the work of Paul Hacker, who uses ‘neo-Hinduism’ to define a movement among Indian thinkers in the 19th and 20th centuries which sought to re-interpret Hindu religion in order to respond to Western values and knowledges (219-20). Hacker identifies Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya (1838-1894) to be “a pioneer of Neo-Hinduism” (Halbfass, 221). Vivekananda was clearly influenced by Bankim’s understanding of Hinduism as socially engaged, positivistic and patriotic (Halbfass, 243-4).
the first category of accounts are many extensive biographies by monks of the Ramakrishna
order as well as by Vivekananda devotees. These include the works of Noble (1910),
Nikhilananda (1953), Shankari Prasad Basu (1969) and Burke (1983-8), and generally
portray Vivekananda as larger than life and focus on his ‘pure’ spiritual vision, removed
from worldly (and particularly Western) influences. Many contemporary works, although
attempting a more thorough contextualisation and evaluation of Vivekananda, still appear to
be blinded by the mythology which has been constructed in his wake. Among these
reverential accounts is a study by Kapoor (1987) which asks questions like “was it sheer
chance or the inscrutable hand of destiny that helped him gain a berth at the Chicago
parliament..?” (viii); as well as an account by Sen (2000) which Sil criticises as “a crypto-
hagiographical interpretation of Vivekananda’s achievements under the veneer of academic
analysis” (2001, 359).

These accounts have proven useful in terms of historical information and religious
interpretation. However, it seems that the magnitude of Vivekananda’s celebrity at times
prevents his examination as a human working in specific socio-historical contexts. Such
accounts tend to uncritically support Vivekananda’s claims for the universal nature of his
spiritual message, and ignore the often strategic and situational aspects of his world
mission. Furthermore, Sil points out how

this idealized portrait of Vivekananda has encouraged Indian politicians of
fundamentalist leanings in projecting their frankly chauvinistic Hindutva (the literal
meaning of the word is ‘Hindu consciousness’, but it is currently being politicised
to imply ‘Hindu nationalism’) in the name of recovering the lost glories of
sanatana (traditional) Hinduism so eloquently proclaimed by the ‘cyclonic Hindu’

A survey of Hindutva publications and websites confirms that Vivekananda is
hermeneutically used as a spiritual forefather of the quest for Hindu hegemony in India
(Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh; Hindutva.org). Vivekananda scholars have reacted against
this appropriation; the essays in Radice (ed. 1998), particularly Bose’s Swami Vivekananda
and the Challenge to Fundamentalism, represent an attempt to “give attention to
Vivekananda’s social and religious ideals, to rescue them from the distortions that were
being worked on them by fundamentalists keen to co-opt Vivekananda for their cause” (Radice 1998, vii).

The above supports the observation that much Vivekananda scholarship must be read as a concerted reaction within a specific social and academic context. Such hermeneutic accounts of Vivekananda have increasingly been written, largely in response to the uncritical and reverential tone of his hagiographers. Dhar (1977), Sil (1997) and R. Chattopadhyaya (1999) have offered useful reassessments of the Vivekananda ‘phenomenon’, presenting new research which drastically challenges the mythologised accounts of Vivekananda’s spirituality and worldly success. Though they function as necessary correctives, these works often tend to get caught up in a preoccupation with details in their desire to deconstruct the myth of Vivekananda. For example, R. Chattopadhyaya spends considerable effort in revealing holes in Burke’s accounts of Vivekananda’s enormous success in America. Several pages (359-364) are devoted to investigating the claim that Vivekananda was offered a chair at Harvard, concluding that there is no supporting evidence. This text should therefore be properly used as a corrective to previous Vivekananda biographies, for it offers little interpretation or analysis of its own. Another context for Vivekananda scholarship is a group of mostly Western-published accounts by scholars including R. King (1999), Nandy (1983), Will (1996), Koppedrayer (2004) and Brekke (1999; 2002). These texts are extremely useful to my study in that they provide varying critiques of Vivekananda’s project to represent Hinduism from within the contemporary Orientalist discourse. However, these works often fall victim to the most hermeneutic decontextualisation of Vivekananda. By virtue of their critical focus on Orientalism, they often locate Vivekananda solely within a polemical engagement with the West, and tend to discount the authenticity and indigeneity of his spiritual mission.

This survey of the diversity and hermeneutics of Vivekananda scholarship is necessary to define what aspect of Vivekananda I focus on, and moreover, what I do not claim to examine. In my study, I do not treat Vivekananda as either a superhuman saint or a
manipulative Orientalist puppet, for the story is more complex than this simple dichotomy. Rather, he was a dynamic figure who simultaneously rejected and appropriated Orientalist discourses, while his spirituality was at once Western informed and authentically Indian. Therefore, my study examines how Vivekananda’s worldly battle with Orientalism was informed by his religious beliefs as well as multiple cultural contexts. For this purpose, I examine only details of Vivekananda’s discourse which relate to the West. By his discourse, I refer to his public representation of himself, India, and Hinduism; these three projects are intimately linked, as Vivekananda tended to consider his physical person as an embodiment of India and Hinduism.

What I cannot claim in this study is an authoritative or complete documentation of the theology of his spiritual message, but rather must limit myself generally to the way in which his message facilitated a renegotiation of the intellectual and cultural relationship between India and the West. Furthermore, due to my focus on Vivekananda’s life and writings in (and pertaining to) the West, I cannot claim to offer an account of Vivekananda’s social importance in India. Excluded are aspects of his life such as his ideological influence in the emergent nationalist movement, and the philanthropic and religious role of his Ramakrishna math and mission, which have been ably outlined by R. Chattopadhyaya (1999), Raychaudhuri (1988), Dhar (1977) and Shamita Basu (2002). One final qualification is necessary. The reader may, at times, be surprised at the sweeping generalisations and often polemical exaggeration in Vivekananda’s rhetoric. However, this study is not intended to be an argument with Vivekananda; rather, I leave his hyperbolic comments for the most part unrefuted, trusting that the reader will not interpret this as accordance. I do not wish to evaluate whether Vivekananda was right or wrong, but rather how he attempted to renegotiate India’s position in relation to the Orientalist discourse.
Edward Said’s Orientalism

Before continuing in this study, it is necessary to elaborate on the parameters of what I have been referring to as the Orientalist discourse, a concept I borrow from Edward Said. Said’s influential text, *Orientalism* (1978) is, in the most succinct analysis, a book about the self’s creation of the other. Specifically, *Orientalism* examines this othering as it has occurred in recent Western, and especially colonial, history. Said claims that, in asserting a fundamental dichotomy between the West and ‘the other’, Western cultures have created an essentialised subject: the Oriental. Said’s general argument will surprise no one: (a) the West does not properly understand nor represent the East in its own cultural productions; and furthermore, (b) the West has a history of exercising power over the East. However, the thesis that earns the text the designation of “unprecedented” in its subversive influence (Prakash 1995, 200), is its claim that (b) is a direct correlate of (a). Following Foucault’s theories of the correlation of knowledge with power, *Orientalism* is the uncovering\(^8\) of the complicit nature of Western writings about the Orient in maintaining what Said holds to be the greatest injustice of our time: the imperial domination of the West over the East in terms of political, economic, and intellectual power.

According to Bhabha (1994), Orientalism can be understood in terms of form and content (71). Form pertains to the process by which the Orient is understood through the construction of false dualisms of self and other. Said hypothesises that the academic pursuit of knowledge is an attempt to understand ourselves through scrutinizing the other (1978, 54), but critiques the academic practice of compiling and translating material about the Orient, in that it often emerges as hegemonic knowledge true in and of itself through the “linear prose authority of discursive analysis” (284). This process of rendering an entire geographic region and peoples down to an anthology of authoritative texts can be summarised as the process of textualisation. Orientalist scholars not only create travelogues,

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\(^8\) Although I start with Said’s work, I do not wish to imply that *Orientalism* was the first text to examine the relation of politics and Orientalist scholarship. Many studies, such as Abdel Malek’s *Orientalism in Crisis* (1963), predated Said’s critical perspective (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993, 3).
literature, and academic anthologies, they also take an interest in Oriental cultural products. Influenced by Romantic thought, 19th century Orientalists sought out foreign literature, mythologies, and philosophies. Having interpreted and translated Oriental cultural documents, the Orientalist seized the authority to speak about the Orient. This historical appropriation of the Orient had several aspects. Colonial era academia studied philology, religion, and social structure of the Orient with the aim of revealing the original and essential differences of humanity (233), whereupon they could be slotted neatly on an evolutionary hierarchy (206). Consequently, the Orient was denied the possibility of authentic diversity, and the Oriental disenfranchised from self-representation.

The dichotomy between Orient and Occident is given content through the attribution of alien characteristics to the former. Said points to the prevalence of the “theses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality” (1978, 206) which serve to highlight the West’s superiority on all counts. In order to achieve this hierarchy, the Orient is commonly identified with subordinate elements in Western society: “delinquents, the insane, women, the poor” (207). It is legitimate to contend that to the male dominated field of colonial scholarship, woman would represent the perfect polarity to sane, authoritative, masculine scholarship (207). Said identifies many illustrations of the Orient as penetrable (308) and concludes that “the association of the Orient and sex is remarkably persistent” (309). Feminisation can be singled out as a specific rhetorical strategy used by Orientalists to designate their subject as irredeemably alien and subordinate. Linked to feminisation is the mystification of the Orient. Influenced by contemporary thinking, Orientalist scholarship subscribed to the Enlightenment ideal of rational mastery of the unknown. The very discipline of Orientalism posits the rational versus the irrational, as it is the scholar’s task to render intelligible something that is mythic and mysterious (77).

By dichotomising the Orient along false polarities of irrational/ rational, feminine/ masculine, mystical/worldly, the Orientalist discourse created a one dimensional subject. This is why Said is able to refer to the Oriental without any specification: the category of the
Oriental had become a hegemonic discourse in the West, ‘known’ by all who approached the Orient in the colonial period.

References to Arabs or Orientals belonged to a recognizable, and authoritative, convention or formulation, one that was able to subordinate detail to it... the attribute of being Oriental overrode any countervailing instance. An Oriental man was first an Oriental and only second a man (Said 1978, 231).

This essentialising of the Oriental into a hegemonic type was more than just academic shorthand; it became instrumental to Western biological theories of race (231), as well as political sentiments such as Kipling’s infamous ‘white man’s burden’. Through such hegemonic understandings, a mandate emerged that the Orient must be governed. To be governed it must be known (215). By knowing it, one learns that it must be governed. The logic is self perpetuating; hence the complicity of Orientalist scholarship in the colonial project.

**Orientalism and India**

Many scholars have investigated the role of Orientalist discourse in forwarding British imperialism in the Indian sub-continent (Inden 1986, 1990; R. King 1999; Guha 1997; Prakash 1990, 1995; Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993; Said 1994). British colonial rule in India (1757-1947) was a history of domination so totalising that Said posits it became, for Orientalists, a “fact of nature” (1994, 35). Ronald Inden’s *Imagining India* (1990) uses a Saidian argument to show how “European scholars and their doubles, the colonial administrators and traders, assumed for themselves the power to know the hidden essences of the Other and act upon them” (6). Inden’s work traces how these assumed characteristics of the Indian perpetuated the view that “the paternal, centralized administration that the British themselves had established in the subcontinent... would provide the way out of India’s developmental impasse” (1990, 65).  

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9 Inden specifically focuses on how the assumption of the ‘undemocratic’ institution of caste as essential to the Indian condition has led to typological schemes such as Dumont’s infamous distinction between Homo Hierarchicus and Homo Aequalis (Prakash 1990, 393). Such generalisations easily fit into evolutionary theories positioning European society as inherently superior to Indian (Inden 1986).
Western understanding of ‘Hinduism’ is emblematic of European discourse on the Indian mind. Many other scholars have used a similar line of analysis to trace the history of this encounter in more detail. S. N. Balagangadharan’s fascinating work, *The Heathen in His Blindness...* (1994) illustrates how European political domination sought more than just territory; religious control was a primary motivation for many Orientalists, and religious essentialism was the result.

Orientalism served to not only essentialise India, but scholars such as R. King and Balagangadharan have argued that it reified Hinduism under a religious model informed by Christianity. A full assessment of the European ‘discovery’ of ‘Hinduism’ is beyond the scope of this study, and is ably documented by scholars such as Balagangadharan, R. King (1999, 96-117), and Frykenberg (1989). In India, textualisation occurred as Orientalists uncovered, translated, and studied Indian sacred texts, regarding them to signify the authoritative bases of Hinduism. Furthermore, having ‘discovered’ the sacred essences of Indian religion, Orientalists subsequently used these texts to judge the India of animal sacrifice and polytheism that they saw around them. When Hinduism in practice fell short of the philosophy of its texts, three assumptions became possible: most Indians were not proper Hindus; Hinduism as the Orientalists discovered it was a fallen and degenerate version of its former self; and/or Hinduism was an inherently nonsensical and incoherent religion. All three had critical effects on the representation of India in the Orientalist mind.

Designating the majority of real Indian religious practice as other than right practice is a problematic result of the Orientalist’s essentialising focus on text and theology, and “inevitably marginalizes more localized religious forms” (R. King, 66; Inden 1990, 130). As long as the Orientalist maintains the power to discourse on the ‘true’ nature of Hinduism, the living, practicing Hindu is necessarily subordinate (R. King, 91). Furthermore, labeling Hinduism as degenerate implies reference to a past when Hinduism was pure and unified. Inden illustrates how this ‘golden age’ of Indian civilisation is generally posited to be the Gupta empire (fourth and fifth centuries AD), after which Indian
civilisation entered a spiral of political, religious and moral decline (Inden 1990, 7-8). Guha has suggested that the historical study of India, as approached from the perspective that it had once been a pure (and religiously unified) civilisation, was one of the greatest colonial tools: “It was conquest which empowered the conquerors to impose on the colonized a past written from the colonizer’s point of view and uphold that writing as foundational to the law of the land” (1997, xiv). The appropriation of the past is yet another way in which the coloniser could assert the necessity of European paternal rule. Not only practicing Hindus, but also the entirety of modern India, were subordinated to Western essentialisations of Hinduism.

The possibility that the Hindu mind is nonsensical, although seemingly contradictory to the belief in an essentially pure Hinduism, seems to have manifested itself in tandem with the first two conclusions. The European inability to understand Hinduism in practice is often rationalised by the blanket terms ‘mystical’ or ‘symbolic’. R. King elaborates on this theme by demonstrating how the Hindu religion was seen to be inherently ‘mystical’, a term understood to be directly opposed to the European philosophical and rational mind set (118-42; Inden 1986, 412-4). Here, Inden finds a Hegelian juxtaposition of the rational European Christian with the mad, mystical Hindu:

> [t]he Hindu mind, directed first by a sensuous imagination that cannot properly relate subject and object, lurches first from one extreme to the other, from a bonkers ritualism to a solipsistic mysticism, then to a nihilistic salvationism of the Buddha, then to the schizophrenic religion of Siva and Vishnu. Instead of seeing the triumph of man, reason, and the spirit, however, we see the triumph of the effeminate, the sensuous, the parochial (Inden 1990, 129).

This mystification of Hinduism went hand in hand with its feminisation. Metaphors often used by Orientalists to describe the mysterious entity of Hinduism reflect the recurrent theme of the penetrability of the Orient: “Hinduism has been likened to a vast sponge, which absorbs all that enters it...” (T.G. Percival Spear, 1958, in Inden 1986, 429). Another common metaphor in Indological discourse is that “Hinduism has often and justly been compared to a jungle” (Sir Charles Eliot [1862-1931] in Inden 1990, 86). Inden concludes that “there is... little doubt here that this jungle with its soil, is, like Spear’s
sponge, also a female, one that can be managed by its male masters and known so long as they don’t become entwined in its embraces” (1990, 87). The domination of India is explicitly linked to its femininity in the words of Macauley: “The physical organisation of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy... his pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled on by my men of bolder and more hardy breeds” (in Smith 2003, 96). In quotations such as these, it becomes evident how the Orientalist discourse on India and Hinduism served to legitimate the masculine and rational British colonial project. From the studies of Said, Inden, R. King and Balagangadharita, a portrait of Orientalism in India emerges which serves to perpetuate colonial rule, as well as limit the possibility of indigenous self-representation.

The Indian Response

The marginalisation of indigenous voices was not total. Orientalism was not just a set of discourses with which colonial scholars and rulers essentialised India; Indian thinkers actively negotiated these modes of knowing, refuting the Western Orientalist’s reification of Hinduism. The 19th century was a time of enormous intellectual change in India; centered in Bengal, many scholars have chronicled what is commonly referred to as the Bengal Renaissance (Kopf 1969; Schwab 1984). The Indian encounter with Orientalist knowledges and Western influences was ambivalent, as thinkers were divided in terms of its possibilities and consequences. Jackson characterises 19th century Hindu reform movements in terms of their reaction to the West, ranging from ‘liberal’ to ‘conservative’ (3). The advances in Orientalist scholarship regarding Indian religion and history were received by many as beneficial to India’s national heritage and sense of identity. New accounts of the Vedas and the ‘discovery’ of the ‘golden age’ of Hinduism were not just essentialising tools for knowing India, they helped India know itself. Rammohun Roy (1772/4-1833) is typical of this earlier generation of Indians who saw British rule and the influence of Christianity as positive stimuli for religious reform (A. Sharma 2002, 3, 11), and whom Jackson would
label as ‘liberal’. It seems that Roy internalised many of the critiques levied on Hinduism by Orientalist scholarship. His movement, the Brahmo Samaj, was heavily influenced by Protestant Christianity, and represented an attempt to reformulate Hinduism in a monotheistic, socially engaged, and rational paradigm (Kopf 1979; Jackson, 3-4). Vivekananda was a member of the Brahmo Samaj for a short time in his youth; his version of Hinduism clearly owes much to thinkers such as Roy and later Brahmo leaders such as Devendranath Tagore (1817-1905) and Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884).10

Not all of Vivekananda’s contemporaries were so positively receptive to Western influences. Conservative reformers tended to look inward and backward to find strategies to negotiate Orientalism. Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) is an example of a Hindu reformer who staunchly opposed British rule, and aimed to defend Hinduism against colonial influences. However, even from such a reactionary stance, Saraswati’s Arya Samaj movement was clearly influenced by Orientalist religious paradigms, insisting on the Protestant-style consolidation of the Vedas as infallible texts. Furthermore, he designated later Indian sacred texts to be inauthentic and false (A. Sharma 2002, 121-6), leading Williams to accuse him of “brahman elitism exclud[ing] the vernacular traditions and their poets” (1974, 106). This brief outline of 19th century Indian religious reform movements shows how neo-Hindu leaders sought to refute the Orientalist reifications of Hinduism, but often echoed the patterns of textualisation and historical appropriation. Western knowledges influenced and challenged Indian religious self perception in explicit and often implicit ways.

Jackson locates Vivekananda and the later Ramakrishna movement as ‘centrists’, in that they “strongly defended Hinduism against Western attack while selectively borrowing elements from the West” (3). The work of Williams (1974) supports the identification of Vivekananda’s centrist position (106). Jackson’s schema can be criticised for its dismissal

10 There is no authoritative reason why Vivekananda left the Brahmo Samaj. Accounts by Ramakrishna devotees often claim that he did not find the fulfillment of his spiritual longing in such a rationalised faith (for example,
of indigenous religious developments unrelated to Western influence, as well as the implication that Indian religious reformers either unilaterally rejected or accepted Orientalist models of religion. Rather, it is clear that the relationship between Indian religious reform and Western religious categories was much more insidious and nuanced. However, Jackson’s argument that Vivekananda occupied a position between conservative and liberal responses to Orientalism suggests that he may be an illustrative example of this complex relationship with the West.

I do not wish to portray Vivekananda as a unique figure in this regard, although much scholarship represents him in this way. Throughout this paper, often in the form of footnotes, I situate Vivekananda within his Indian context; however, the scope and influence of his mission legitimates his treatment as extraordinary. In the following, I examine Vivekananda’s engagement with Western discourses, pursuing Sarkar’s observation that he was aware of the West “as simultaneously a stimulus and a threat” (in Shamita Basu, 73). Above all, Vivekananda took these discourses seriously, and I interpret his presentation of Hinduism in the West to be a strategic engagement with Orientalism. In the following chapter, I examine how, in his public lectures and appearances, he alternatively refuted, inverted, and manipulated Orientalist theses of ‘the nature of India’ in a concerted attempt to restructure the hierarchies of power perpetuated by such discourses.

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see Nikhilananda 1953, 8); however, he was suitably impressed by the progressivity of the Samaj to admit that, “but for Ramakrishna I would have been a Brahma missionary” (Jackson, 23).
Chapter 2. Resistance: Vivekananda’s Project of Re-representation

Although Vivekananda’s life projects were diffuse and have consequently been interpreted in many ways, I contend that there is a thread which runs through his mission in the West, this being the re-representation of India in response to Orientalism. At the beginning of his travels in North America, Vivekananda referred often to his primary commitment to “quietly raise some funds” (in Raychaudhuri 1998, 4) on behalf of India’s poor. However, upon arrival in America, he quickly realised the severity of Western perceptions of Hinduism, and understood the link between Orientalist essentialisations and the paternalism of the colonial project. On August 20, 1893, Vivekananda wrote a letter home sharing his realisation that “the whole world looks down with contempt upon the three millions of earthworms crawling upon the fair soil of India and trying to oppress one another” (Letters, 41). The research of Jackson and Burke suggests that Vivekananda originally did not plan a defensive mission; however, in response to the realisation of Western prejudices regarding India, many of his speeches in the West aimed to simply refute what he claimed to be misperceptions about cultural and religious practices of Indians (Jackson, 33; Burke 1984 II, 331), while offering salient criticisms of Western culture.

Significantly, Vivekananda planned to change these perceptions through his religious teachings. For Vivekananda, material and spiritual goals were not separate, and, as I will argue throughout this study, the harmonisation of these aspects of life were a central facet of his Vedantic philosophy. By November 15, 1894, he wrote home in a letter,

[y]ou may not understand why a Sannyasin should be in America, but it is necessary. Because the only claim you have to be recognised by the world is your religion, and good specimens of our religious men are required to be sent abroad to give other nations an idea that India is not dead... [and] to show at least that you are not savages (CW VIII, 325-6).

This quotation is significant. It alludes to a central argument of my study: that Vivekananda aimed to use the example of his physical person as a medium to embody the inversion of Orientalist misperceptions. Also evident here is the development of Vivekananda’s mission in the West, from that of straightforward fundraising, to the realisation that re-representation
was a necessary precursor to any substantial change in the hierarchical power structures between India and the West. His mission was a battle for meaning to conceptually ameliorate the status of India in the eyes of the West. An assertive articulation of Hindu religious teachings was the necessary method, since he correctly identified that misperceptions of Hinduism formed the core of Western disdain for India. As outlined in chapter one, Inden has argued that Orientalist scholarship took Hinduism to be the essence of the Indian mind (1990, 129) as irrational, superstitious and mystical. Vivekananda, however, saw in Hindu religious tradition a location for the reformulation of these misperceptions. He was confident that a ‘correct’ representation of Hinduism had the power to invert these prejudices into a relationship of respect and friendship.

Raychaudhuri explains how this battle of representation was linked to the aid campaign originally envisioned: “the plan... was not simply to raise funds, but to earn for India the status of the revered teacher and thus restructure the relationship of dominance and subjection. The western nations as India’s disciples would also be her friends and offer spontaneous assistance” (1988, 257). The naiveté of this plan is noted by Raychaudhuri; indeed, a common criticism of Vivekananda is his philosophical idealism without consideration for the material feasibility of his visions. This idealism is reflected in his oft-repeated plan for a straightforward exchange of Indian spiritual wisdom for Western material knowledge (Sil 1997, 103; R. Chattopadhyaya, 95; Letters, 62; Kapoor, 279). Vivekananda did not make practical arrangements for the execution of such a monumental trade, leaving such details to the less visionary. However, behind this notion was an insightful understanding of the necessity of a change of perceptions in order to restructure the relationship between India and the West. Vivekananda executed this mission on three fronts: firstly, he endeavoured to correct Western Orientalist essentialisations; secondly, he attempted to level the playing field by offering a harsh critique of Western culture; and

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11 G. Sharma argues that Vivekananda’s legacy as the “idealist par excellence” was not incompatible with his status as “sober realist” (1987, vii). Such reverential studies are balanced by Sil’s criticism of his well-meaning but impractical plans for the social regeneration of India’s poor (1997, 80-1).
thirdly, in his presentation of Vedanta, he engaged in what Nandy has called an “alternative language of discourse” (xvii) wherein spirituality was asserted as a marker of cultural worth, and Vedanta was presented as the consolidation of India’s spiritual wealth. In the following, I outline his mission to the West in terms of these three projects, leaving sustained criticisms until chapter three.

**Defence of India and Hinduism**

A preliminary part of Vivekananda’s re-representation of India to Western audiences was a defence of Hinduism from the “theses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West” (Said 1978, 206), as well as of its essential effeminacy (Inden 1990, 87). His earlier speeches, particularly those of the World’s Parliament of Religions, were in general an effort to correct Western misperceptions and denigrations of Hindu religion, maintaining that Hinduism could be considered a religion of equal esteem to any of the nine others presented at the parliament. In his parliamentary address titled simply “Hinduism”, he endeavoured to present an authentic and authoritative Hinduism, what Kapoor uncritically hails as a “pristine form sans the accretions which had diminished its glow” (55). These ‘accretions’ are certainly many, and include popular practices of devotional and ascetic forms of Hinduism. Vivekananda, like many of his contemporary religious reformers, attempted to conceptually divorce his Hinduism from such customs. An American newspaper reported on August 29, 1893 that “[h]e was asked about... the throwing themselves in front of the juggernaut car, and said one must not blame the Hindoo people for the car business, for it was the act of fanatics and mostly of lepers” (CW III, 468).

In response to inquiries regarding the position of women in Indian society, Vivekananda explained that, in fact, Hindu religion is unique in its worship of women (Sil 1997, 69) and that culturally, “they were held in such great esteem that they were kept in seclusion” (CW III, 468). Upon questioning by his audience about the practice of *sati* so
often held up by Orientalists as an example of Hindu degeneracy, he “flatly denied that child widows were abused in society” and dismissed any who practiced *sati* as fanatics beyond the pale of Hindu tradition (Sil 1997, 70). The institution of caste is identified by Inden as one of the foundational pillars in the Orientalist knowledge of India. Recognising that any respectable Hinduism must be retrieved from the social inequalities perpetuated by the caste system, Vivekananda frequently explained the institution of caste as a cultural degeneration,\(^1\) not a central tenet of Hinduism. In a lecture, he explained that “[c]aste is a social custom, and all our great preachers have tried to break it down... Caste is simply the outgrowth of the political institutions of India; it is a hereditary trade guild” (*CW* V, 311).

In the above examples, his defensive strategy emerges as either a straight denial of controversial social practices, or a careful separation of a pure Hindu sentiment from the social and cultural history of Indian popular religious practice. This unconditional apologetic for his homeland was reserved only for the West; in Indian lectures he did not hesitate to criticise Hindu religion in its many manifestations (Raychaudhuri 1998,12). However, his rhetorical savvy is evident in his comment, “who is a greater ass than the person who washes his own dirty linen in public?” (in Raychaudhuri 1988, 250).\(^3\)

A further defensive strategy that coloured Vivekananda’s representation of himself and of Hinduism was his attempt to refute the Orientalist thesis of Indian nature as effeminate. In what Sinha interprets as a reaction to this discourse (1995, 21), Vivekananda insistently emphasised manly qualities in his presentation of India and of himself.\(^4\) Here it is evident how he attempted to embody the refutation of Orientalism: his very person

\(^1\) Vivekananda’s opinion of the caste system was actually quite conservative. He argued for the originally progressive reasoning of an “institution to provide a niche for everybody according to their level of development as a basis of steady growth into high civilisation” (Raychaudhuri 1988, 278) but acknowledged that it had developed into a stagnant and oppressive system due to its hereditary application (284-8).

\(^3\) Such comments seem to appear only in Indian publications. This quotation is Raychaudhuri’s translation from a Bengali text.

\(^4\) Vivekananda was not unique in his attempt to reformulate Hinduism as specifically masculine, and therefore vital and active; a masculine Hindu identity had been emphasised by members of the Brahma Samaj, as well as the influential Bengali thinker Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) (Sen, 7). In *Dharmatattva, The Essence of Dharma*, Bankimchandra asserted that “the dharma of man is to be strong” (Brekke 1999, 208). Such masculine reformulations of Hindu identity are strongly influential in contemporary nationalist movements such as the
became a locale for the inversion of the stereotype of the weak and malnourished Hindu ascetic that prevailed in America. An obsession with bodily strength marked his life. In his youth, he joined several gymnasiums; he later used his person as a defence of India’s masculinity, both as an exemplary representative, and on at least one occasion, in terms of physical self-defence when accosted by “particularly uncivil Christian missionaries” (Sen 2000, 21). He commented that vegetarianism was the reason for India’s decline in strength, and was an enthusiastic carnivore (R. Chattopadhyaya, 98).

This obsession with strength and manliness has been interpreted as a defensive phenomenon engendered by an Indian feeling of impotence under colonial rule. Nandy reflects how colonial subjects responded to the problem of domination by attempting to find in their own tradition a parallel masculinity with which to counter the conqueror. For Vivekananda, this was summarised in the kshatriya ideal (Nandy, 24), which he used to exemplify an essential Hindu nature. He frequently asserted his own kshatriya identity, although his caste status was not unambiguous (Halbfass 1988, 229).

Through the bravery and courage embodied in the kshatriya ideal, Vivekananda saw not just the self-assertion of Hindu masculine identity, but also the full realisation of religiosity. He insisted that physical strength was a precursor to Hindu spirituality:

You will be nearer to God through football than through the study of the Gita... You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger... You will understand the Upanishads better and the glory of the Atman when your body stands firm upon your feet, and you feel yourselves as men (CW III, 242).

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Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which focuses on ‘man-making’ physical activities for male youth (Embree 1994, 627; Gold 1991, 560).

15 See Harold Isaacs’ Images of Asia (1958) for a summary of American perceptions of Indians. Through 181 interviews, he concludes that American visions of Indians are particularly stereotyped, derivative largely of Kipling’s exoticised, mystified and pejorative portrayals. Although conducted after Vivekananda’s time, these visions had likely not changed significantly since the 19th century.

16 In his later years, it seems that his voracious appetite and increasing disinclination to maintain an exercise regime threatened his physical health (Sil 1997, 120-1).

17 His family was of the Kayastha caste, counted amongst the twice-born ‘clean Sudras’ (Raychaudhuri 1988, 221), but which Vivekananda insisted belonged within the kshatriya caste. Furthermore, his initiation as a sannyasi implies the rejection of all caste distinctions.

18 The legacy of Vedantic philosophy is closely bound up with the kshatriya caste: Dhar explains how the Upanishads were originally propagated by Kshatriya kings in opposition to Vedic Brahminical ritual (7-8).
He identified the Upanishad’s central teaching as strength (237) and constantly enjoined his fellow Hindus to “Be brave! Be strong! Be fearless!... Even though you know you are going to be killed, fight till you are killed” (in Sil 1997, 96). He once reflected to his female disciple Nivedita, “everything seems to lie in manliness. This is my new gospel” (in Sil 1997, 117).

In the above, it becomes clear that Vivekananda saw himself as a physical representation of India and Hinduism. The embodiment of religious ideals in human form is typically Indian; mythological and historical figures such as Krishna, Rama and Shivaji are commonly used as cultural signifiers to illustrate the perfect fulfillment of humanity, manusyatva (Brekke 1999, 212; Gold 1991, 548). Vivekananda clearly envisioned himself alongside these divinely inspired figures (Letters, 41-3). Therefore, his self-assertion and defence of India were one and the same project. When he physically defended himself against missionaries, he was simultaneously defending the identity of India. He was acutely aware of his physical presence as a specimen sent to represent to the world that “India is not dead”, rather, it is virile and active.

Chowdhury notes how in his person, he cultivated an Indian masculinity to counter the masculinity of colonial power. Rather than completely adopting the Western vision of manhood, Chowdhury concludes that he inverted Orientalist stereotypes of the passive, effeminate ascetic (120) by creating a new image of the active, masculine sannyasi. This archetype embodies an alternative masculinity in which renunciation and purity are equated with strength (127), and India’s power is manifest in its capacity for accumulation, not dominance (138). Nandy interprets this masculine emphasis differently, and is offended by what he sees as an attempt to reformulate the Hindu concept of the ideal person in terms of Western models (24-5). I would argue that Vivekananda’s vision of masculinity was informed by both a defensive appropriation of Western norms, and inspiration from indigenous sources such as the Gita. In his defence of India against Orientalist charges of
degeneracy and effeminacy, Vivekananda envisioned himself as a new *manusyatva*, embodying a noble, active and masculine Hinduism.

**Criticism of the West**

A second front on which Vivekananda fought for the reformulation of the relationship between India and the West is evident in his frequent criticisms of Western culture and religion, as well as its imperialism and missionary activity. Orientalist understandings of India’s degeneracy and primitivity engendered sentiments such as Kipling’s ‘white man’s burden’, the assumption that only the paternal guidance of colonial rule “would provide the way out of India’s developmental impasse” (Inden 1990, 65). Vivekananda responded to this discourse by negating the thesis of Western superiority. He inverted evolutionary understandings by criticising Europeans along the same lines: “the English, only just a little while ago they were savages... the vermin crawled on the ladies’ bodices,... and they scented themselves to disguise the abominable odor of their persons... Even now, they are barely emerging from barbarism...[t]hey are quite savage” (in Sil 1997, 64). He loved to recount the numerous cultural failings of Westerners, ranging from disgust at their toilet practices, to their unhygienic food preparation techniques (Raychaudhuri 1988, 305).

The central thesis of his criticism of the West was an accusation of materialism, and a corresponding lack of authentic spirituality. This is summarised in his disparaging remarks that the “satisfaction of appetites is their true God” (in Raychaudhuri 1988, 310), and that Christians are “mere babies in metaphysical and spiritual education”. U. King has suggested that this criticism of materialism as “a defective view of reality” is a

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19 Vivekananda levied equally aggressive criticisms of Indian social norms, which were rarely voiced in the West.  
20 Dhar and Will provide critiques of the superficiality of this claim, pointing out that Vivekananda was either ignorant of, or chose to overlook, Christian mysticism and Western philosophical idealism (Dhar, 148; Will 1996, 384).
response to cultural colonialism and the increasing Western influence in India (1978, 62). Although often impressed by Western progress, Vivekananda interpreted its overemphasis on material culture as a process of devolution. Upon his second visit to the West, he reflected on the democratic capitalism of the West as “composed for the most part of greed, selfishness, and struggle for privilege and power” (in R. Chattopadhyaya, 270). This assessment was due in part to his ascetic orientation which predisposed him to the feeling that “we who are progressing know that the more we progress, the more avenues are opened to pain as well as to pleasure” (WRI, 37). His message evidently resonated amongst well-off Westerners, particularly women. In an essay entitled “The Modern Despair”, Nivedita summarises an undercurrent of disillusionment which attracted her to his teachings. She describes a world marked simultaneously by “growing dissatisfaction and vulgarity of privilege and the growing sadness and pain of the dispossessed” (in U. King, 72). Vivekananda encouraged such sentiments, repeatedly emphasising the material nature of the West, and argued that a solely Western world order would be without spirit or compassion.

His harshest criticism was reserved for British colonialism, and he had no qualms with directly implicating Western missionaries in the subordination of India. At the World’s Parliament of Religions, he was among many Asian delegates who spoke out against the arrogance and outright hostility of missionary activity in colonial nations. In a short address aptly titled “Religion Not the Crying Need of India”, he spoke directly to the audience, asking

you Christians, you are so fond of sending missionaries to save the souls of the Heathen- why do you not try to save their bodies from starvation? In India, during the terrible famines, thousands died from hunger, yet you Christians did nothing... It is an insult to starving people to offer them religion... (in Yogas, 194).

21 Vivekananda reacted strongly against what he saw to be the creeping of Western cultural tendencies in India, as is evident in his harsh criticisms of the Brahma Samaj (Letters, 105). Although he clearly benefited from a Western education and the hospitality of Americans and British, he was vehemently opposed to the modernisation of India along a Western paradigm.
Newspaper reports during the parliament indicate that on at least one occasion Vivekananda engaged in heated debates with missionaries on the parliament stage (CW III, 473-4). He pleaded that material well-being was a necessary precursor to spirituality (Raychaudhuri 1988, 252) and complained that missionaries did not treat Indians as equals, or even as humans (Letters, 88). This criticism was amplified by Vivekananda’s appropriation of the foundational teachings of Christ as a way to highlight the ‘un-Christian’ ways of missionaries: “you are not like your Christ, whom we could honour and reverence. Do you think, if you came to our doors like him, meek and lowly, with a message of love, living and working and suffering for others, as he did, we should turn a deaf ear? Oh no!” (VIN, 4).

Furthermore, he enjoyed engaging in theological criticisms over what he saw to be the selfish connotations of the golden rule (Sil 1997, 77) and a crippling insistence on original sin (Yogas, 188).

Vivekananda’s rhetorical questioning of the ‘Christianity’ of missionaries garnered some support and considerable discomfort (Jackson, 27; Nikhilananda, 65). The World’s Parliament of Religions was an interfaith event which was nevertheless envisioned by its organisers to be a celebration of Christianity. Joseph Kitagawa has complained that it was a “one-sided ‘Western’ monologue with non-Western guests, who are expected to present their religious and cultural experiences primarily as ‘data’ for the benefit of their Western hosts” (1990, 232). Along with other non-Christian guests, Vivekananda levied a challenge to those who used the parliament stage to proclaim Christianity as the one true, provable, and tolerant religion which would be able to subsume all other faiths (Trumball 1894, 340). At the parliament, Vivekananda referred to a universal faith, but assured his audience that no single religion could- or should- achieve a manifest universality (Kapoor, 359), thereby negating the efforts of Christian evangelists. It seems that his disdain for evangelism was merely defensive, however. By asserting the many deficiencies of modern
Christianity and the material West, he had set the stage for a positive assertion of the superiority of his own tradition, a project which would evolve into a global mission under Vivekananda’s rallying cry, “Up, India, and conquer the world with your spirituality!” (CW III, 277).

**Vivekananda’s Vedanta**

Many scholars have noted how Vivekananda’s vision changed in the months after the World’s Parliament of Religions (U. King, 70; Sil 1997, 155; Khatri 2000, 86). As he lectured on the nobility of India and the equality of Hinduism on the Parliament stage to the roaring applause and admiration of his audience, it became evident that his religious message was his most potent tool to reformulate Western opinions of India. Vivekananda knew that India could not compete with the West in terms of material prosperity, but he believed that his nation’s spiritual wealth and religious maturity could be a medium for the inversion of its subordinate relationship with the West (Kumar 1991, 126).

> We Hindus must believe that we are the teachers of the world... Rights and privileges and other things can only come through friendship, and friendship can only come between two equals. When one of the parties is a beggar, what friendship can there be?.. So, I must call upon you to go out to England and America, not as beggars but as teachers of religion (CW III, 444).

It is evident from quotes such as these that Vivekananda’s presentation of Hinduism was bound up in a battle for re-representation of Indian to the West. Raychaudhuri has observed how Vivekananda’s cultural self-assertion frequently translated into a religious self-assertion claiming “superiority for Hinduism vis-à-vis Christianity” (1988, 247), and Brekke has argued that Vivekananda’s “missionary endeavour of Vedanta is part of the self-assertion of Hindus” (1999, 213). I agree with these assessments when examining a large part of Vivekananda’s Western lectures. In public speeches, such as those at the World’s Parliament, it is clear that the way in which he presented Hinduism was carefully tailored to renegotiate India’s role as spiritually superior. However, I argue that a utilitarian

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22 On the implicit and often explicit Christian theology of this event, see a previous paper by this author, “The
examination of Vivekananda’s lectures is limited if it discounts the genuineness of his personal religious mission in the West, and the extent to which he was wholeheartedly devoted to the religion he represented.

To understand how Vivekananda used the world stage to assert India as spiritually superior to the West, it is necessary to examine how he represented Vedanta, which he identified as the essential core teachings of Indian religion. Although Vivekananda was personally influenced by the non-dualism of Shankara, summarised in the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, his representation of Hinduism in public generally bore the simple label of Vedanta. This term commonly refers to a body of texts including the Upanishads, and a specific philosophical school of Hinduism; however, Vivekananda generally used Vedanta to signify the consolidation of all schools of Hindu thought (Sen, 44), ranging from theistic bhakti traditions (Raychaudhuri 1988, 243) to the atheism of Siddhartha Guatama (Yogas, 722-3). Philosophically, Vivekananda held that all of these paths can be coherently linked by a fundamental monism. This is expressed in the belief in brahman as the only ultimate reality, the unconditioned essence and absolute consciousness (Brahmasutra, 315) which permeates all conditioned reality, maya (Victor 2002, 123).

The identification of Vedanta as the central, unifying theology of Hinduism was a common trend gaining ground in the 19th century. Significantly, this thesis was posited in Orientalist scholarship; scholars such as King and Dhar have suggested that Vedanta was strategically selected by Orientalists as a pacifist philosophy that would prevent civil unrest in their colony (R. King, 130-1; Dhar, 27-36). Although much of the Orientalist study of Vedanta was surely motivated by an intellectual interest and respect for the philosophy of the Upanishads, it is clear that the Orientalist agenda in studying and canonising Indian

Diversity of Unity: Theologies of The World’s Parliaments of Religions, 1893 and 2004”.
23 Vivekananda’s treatment of Buddhism is problematic. He expressed admiration of the figure of the Buddha as the only “absolutely sane man in history” (in Raychaudhuri 1988, 245), and heralded Buddhism as the “fulfillment of Hinduism” (Yogas, 195). However, his insistence in Buddhism’s inclusion within the parameters of Vedantic philosophy explains his claim that Buddha was not an atheist, but rather was unable to articulate his encounter with brahman (R. Chattopadhyya, 63). Not surprisingly, this unorthodox interpretation was a matter of contention with contemporary Buddhist revivalists (Brekke 2002, 52-3).
religion was also linked to colonial control. This is evident in the objectives of the College of Fort William, founded in 1800 in Bengal: “to fix and establish sound and correct principles of religion and government” as “the best security which could be provided for the stability of British power in India” (in R. King, 130-1). The Orientalist interest in Vedanta was echoed in contemporary Hindu thought, perhaps reflecting the power of the Orientalist reification of Indian religion; however, in an fascinating reversal, Vedanta would come to signify the unification of Hinduism, a critical element of Indian nationalism. This development can be seen in writings ranging from Rammohun Roy’s _Vedantacandrika_ (1817) (Halbfass, 222) to Radhakrishnan’s _The Hindu Way of Life_ (1927) which argues that “The Vedanta is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance. Thus the different sects of Hinduism are reconciled by a common standard and are sometimes regarded as the distorted expressions of the one true canon” (in R. King, 135).

Vivekananda’s Vedanta must be understood within this context, its significance largely due to his assertion of the indigenous ability for religious self-representation in the face of contemporary Orientalist reifications of Vedanta. His understanding of Vedanta was clearly derivative of his contemporaries; many have commented that there was little originality in his philosophical message (Brekke 2002, 38-9). His presentation of Vedanta to Western audiences largely followed a succinct formulation:

> [e]ach soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Destiny within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy—by one, or more, or all of these—and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details (Yogas, 575)

In Vedanta, Vivekananda found a message of freedom, tolerance and universalism well suited to the affinities of 19th century American intellectuals, many of whom were reactive against the dogmatism and doctrine of original sin posited by the Christian church (see Jackson, 14; Sil 1997, 98-9). The inclusive and broad understanding of Vedanta established by Vivekananda’s contemporaries was central to an assertion of the superiority of Indian
religion, for he claimed that it was expansive enough to include multiple forms of worship and practice. In a lecture entitled “The Ideal of a Universal Religion”, he explained that “What I want to propagate is a religion that will be equally acceptable to all minds; it must be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystic, and equally conducive to action. And this combination will be the ideal, the nearest approach to a universal religion” (WRI, 23). He continued to explain how his Vedanta fulfills this formula of inclusivity by outlining four paths of yoga which provide a spirituality suitable to the tastes of any of the aforementioned personality types: respectively jnana; bhakti; raja; and karma yoga (24). 

From this inclusivity, Vivekananda frequently asserted that Vedanta’s principles are capable of including all faiths throughout time and place. Philosophically, this is explained by Vedanta’s conviction of the fundamental unity of brahman beyond the appearance of maya. Vedantists are careful to caution that maya isn’t an illusion, as it is commonly translated, but is rather a necessary, only hierarchically lower, form of brahman (Mazumdar, 24). From this perspective, Vedantists can “view dualists, theists, or, for that matter, even atheists with sympathy without in any way compromising their monism. In fact, from a relativistic perspective, all religious and philosophical outlooks deserve respect” (Jackson, 70). Thus, all creeds and divinities can find a place within the expansive reach of Vedanta. The great legacy of Indian religious history, Vivekananda reminded his audience, is its tolerance and absorption of other religious traditions.

Halbfass (227-9), R. King (136) and Brekke (2002, 41) have rightly identified the assertive implications of this rhetoric of inclusivity, which allowed Vivekananda to claim that Vedanta could be the only true universal religion, able to contain all faiths within its hierarchies (Sil 1997, 154). He had assured his audience at the parliament that no historical religion could make this claim of universality; however, upon closer analysis, it is clear that to Vivekananda, Vedanta was greater than any historical religion. Rather, “Vedantic

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24 This sort of formulaic discourse leads Brekke to argue that “Vivekananda’s scientific quest for the religion of a united humanity was a sham because he already had the answer to the search: Advaita Vedanta” (1999, 213).
philosophy was not considered by him as an exclusive possession of the Hindus” (Bose 1998, 285); it was a truth which transcended any textual and historical manifestation (Sen, 59). Asserting Vedanta as a sort of meta-religion even allowed Vivekananda to claim that its philosophies were responsible for the creation of all historical faiths, including Christianity (Raychaudhuri 1988, 291; WRI, 33).

Vivekananda’s lectures also portrayed Vedanta as a practical and humanitarian religious system. In an analysis of the work of Rudolf Otto, R. King has argued that Orientalist scholarship has criticised Vedanta, and especially the Advaitic system of Shankara, as mystical, quietistic, world-denying, and amoral (126-7). In Vivekananda’s representation of Vedanta, there is a concerted attempt to counter the Orientalist mystification of Indian religion, in an effort to “rescue Hinduism from the quagmire of Oriental esotericism to which some Christian missionaries had relegated it” (Sil 1997, 60). His defence against the mystical stereotype included a conscious effort to discourage accounts of miracles on his part (Nikhilananda, 85), as well as that of his guru, Ramakrishna (Letters, 71). Instead, Vivekananda’s religious teachings, aptly summarised in a lecture series titled “Practical Vedanta” (Yogas, 338-77) were an effort to bring religion down from “the hills and jungles [and] plant it firmly upon society and the world” (Sen, 44).

Vivekananda’s reformulation of Vedanta was also motivated by a strong desire to create a framework for social engagement within the parameters of Hindu philosophy (Sil 1997, 74-5), an objective surely influenced by his observations of Western philanthropy (Dhar, 146). For him, the monistic Vedantic aphorism tat tvam asī²⁷ meant “I am the universe- the universe is my body” (WRI, 32), from which he drew a religious mandate for this-worldly activism. To Vivekananda, world-renouncing quietude was frivolous in a world marked by suffering; he had no patience for what he called weakening mysticism (CW III,

²⁵ For example, the inclusivism and tolerance of Hinduism has been a central argument for Hindu nationalists to explain why only Hindus have the authority to rule India (Embree 1994, 633).
²⁶ Vedanta movements continue to exhibit this inclusivity by asserting that all creeds have a place within their theology (Jackson, 68), and by portraying Christ as a great yogi (84; see also image, 46).
225). His socially engaged Vedanta was clearly a refutation of Orientalist visions of a mystical and amoral Hinduism, and no doubt resonated with his Protestant Christian audiences.

This brief outline shows how Vivekananda attempted to establish the spiritual superiority of India by asserting Vedanta as a unified, inclusive, universal, tolerant, humanitarian, and rational faith system. It must be noted that while Vedanta may have been the most advantageous medium with which to reformulate the relationship between India and the West, Vivekananda truly believed in the latter’s need for Indian spirituality. Furthermore, the enthusiastic reception of his audience seems to support this perspective. Though Vivekananda’s public presentations of Vedanta at venues such as the World’s Parliament were clearly preoccupied with a reactive re-representation of Hinduism in the eyes of the West, he had some occasion to more thoroughly deliver his religious teachings.

In 1895, Vivekananda was invited to lead a summer retreat at Thousand Island Park in the St. Lawrence River. For seven weeks, he lived with twelve serious students of Vedanta, and led lectures which delved deeply into the philosophical and devotional aspects of Indian religion (Yogas, 511-572). These lectures and informal discussions were drastically different from his somewhat generic presentations at the World’s Parliament, where Vivekananda avoided mention of foreign terms or complex philosophical concepts; here, he spoke repeatedly of the ultimate goal of Vedanta as moksha, liberation through the realisation of the fundamental unity of atman and brahman (Yogas, 513, 521, 528). The authenticity of his spiritual teachings at Thousand Islands Park is testified to by the initiation into the monastic life of two of these American students: Marie Louise Burke (Abhayananda) and Leon Landsberg (Kripananda) (Nikhilananda, 80). Evidently, Vivekananda was savvy in his public representation of Vedanta to the West, using it as a medium for the inversion of Orientalist misperceptions. However, this does not discount the

27 Shankara used this phrase, generally translated as “thou art that” to signify that “the Brahman is the Self” (Brahmasutra, 319).
authenticity of his spiritual message, which laid the foundations for a renegotiation of India as a spiritual teacher to the West.

This chapter has shown how Vivekananda attempted to reformulate the relationship between India and the West in terms of a defence against Orientalist essentialisations, an attack on Western cultural elitism, and by asserting India as spiritually superior through his presentation of Vedanta. Indian assessments of his success are various, ranging from exaltations as “the liberator of Mother India from bondage” (Sil 1997, 177) to sarcastic complaints that “it did not add glory to Hinduism that Americans have now started cheering him” (Shamita Basu, 163). Reports of his popularity in the West are often exaggerated, but it is evident from several American newspapers that at least a few journalists formed “a new idea of Hinduism” (Letters, 59) and reflected on the questionable wisdom of missionary activity (CW III, 475). Regardless, his endeavour is significant simply because his presence as a representative of a constantly evolving Indian religion refuted the Orientalist’s ability to reify and essentialise Hinduism. However, despite his successes, much recent scholarship has criticised the extent to which Vivekananda adopted Orientalist essentialisations as hermeneutic tools, thereby perpetuating the very dichotomous understandings of reality which he tried to refute. In the following chapter, I outline the major areas in which Vivekananda was complicit with such essentialisations, examining the extent to which these mitigate his authenticity.

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28 For a thorough exposition of the manufacturing of the myth of Vivekananda’s success through the media, see R. Chattopadhyaya, 134-195.
Chapter 3. Complicity: Vivekananda, Orientalism and Essentialisation

In the colonial and postcolonial eras, many groups and individuals have engaged in struggles against the hegemonic knowledge that is Orientalism. The attempt to re-think the nature of India and its history from an indigenous perspective was an important facet of the early nationalist movement, a cause which often claims Vivekananda as a foundational thinker.²⁹ Vivekananda’s mission corresponds with Prakash’s description of the nationalist project as an attempt to “[transform] the object of knowledge, India, from passive to active” (1990, 388). The link between Orientalist scholarship and the growing national consciousness is acknowledged by Thapar (1989, 229), who reflects on the externally constructed vision of Hindu history and identity that was appropriated by many indigenous thinkers. The irony of the situation is, of course, that new reformulations of Hinduism arise simultaneously as a reaction to, and the result of, Orientalist scholarship.

A fascinating aspect of the colonial era are instances of indigenous resistance through the appropriation of colonial discourses. Foucault identifies the impersonal and unpredictable power of discourse: “there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and the ruled at the root of power relations”; rather, power discourses, “by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable” (in R. King, 133). Once put into motion, such discourses are potent tools in the public domain, and are often utilised for indigenous self-assertion. This reactionary representation can be seen to mitigate the legitimacy of such movements; Prakash (1990) and Guha (1982) argue that the reversal of Orientalist essentialisations still implies their legitimation. Nandy describes this irony as a “second colonialism” in which Western discourses are internalised by their subjects (xi; see also Breckenridge and van der Veer, 11). Scholars have contended that such polemical representations of tradition will always be

²⁹ Vivekananda’s relationship with the emergent nationalist movement in India is contested. Although he never committed himself to the nationalistic efforts of his contemporaries such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), his reformulation of Hinduism as a socially engaged, inclusive, and unified religion was hugely influential to Hindu nationalists, and indeed Hindutva organisations frequently cite him in support of their cause (www.rss.org). For a detailed account of how religion was the primary nationalist discourse in Vivekananda’s era, see Shamita Basu.
a form of “anti-essentialist essentialism” (Gerald Graff in Sarkar 1994, 206).

Vivekananda often exhibited this same referential relationship to Orientalism, using its discourses strategically to invert the relationship between India and the West. His rhetoric tended to echo the Orientalist thesis of “radical and irreconcilable” differences between races and civilisations (Said 1978, 233), and he frequently referred to humanity in terms of polarised cultural ‘types’ (CW III, 441; Sil 1997, 61; Sen, 85) with fundamentally differing orientations. Furthermore, Vivekananda acknowledged and perpetuated the dichotomies of feminine/ masculine, mystical/rational, spiritual/material, and used these concepts as heuristic keys in his discussions of India and the West. In the following, I outline a short critique of Vivekananda’s representation of himself and his presentation of Vedanta, examining King’s challenge that they remain stereotypes based on a polemical reaction to Orientalism (1999, 93).

Firstly, it seems that in his engagement with Orientalist knowledges, Vivekananda tailored his self-representation specifically to the expectations of his Western audience, and often used Orientalist stereotypes to his advantage. Secondly, in his presentation of Vedanta, he strategically used the posited polarities of material/ spiritual to his advantage; furthermore, he tended to essentialise the multiplicity of Hindu religion in favour of a unified and generic philosophical system. The critiques of Orientalism outlined by Said, Inden, and R. King therefore provide a useful lens through which to critique Vivekananda’s discourse. However, at the end of this chapter, I argue that the Orientalist critique cannot offer a thorough explanation of Vivekananda’s essentialisations, and in fact may serve to obscure an understanding of the colonial subject. To alleviate this common scholarly overemphasis on Western discourses, I endeavour to reevaluate Vivekananda’s thought in terms of his Indian and religious contexts.
Vivekananda’s Self-Commodification

Many have commented on Vivekananda’s savvy representation of himself to correspond with the implicit expectations and biases of his audience. There is much evidence that his very appearance was a well crafted spectacle; he carefully selected his signature outfit of a silk dress and a turban, which made him appear “more a prince than a sadhu” (Sen, 30; see also Chowdhury, 137). His striking presence was noted by many observers (Sil 1997, 22), and scholars have suggested that his popularity, especially amongst women, was due more to his appearance and oratorical skills than his message (Sil 1997, 91-102; Sen, 32-3). Vivekananda seems to have felt a need to play a certain role to gain sympathy. His charismatic personality could not be constructed (Raychaudhuri 1988, 259), but he clearly used it to his advantage, reflecting that “I know full well how good it is for one’s worldly prospects to be sweet” (CW V, 70).

An actor since childhood, he acknowledged that he was able to delight his female hosts by playing the “curio from India” (Letters, 39). In America, he remarked, any fad can succeed (55). He recognised in Americans an eager audience, although he often doubted the sincerity of their interest in his spiritual message:

> the Americans are a receptive nation. This is why the country is a hotbed of all kinds of religious and irreligious monstrosities. There is no theory so absurd, no doctrine so irrational, no claim so extravagant, no fraud so transparent, but can find their [sic] numerous believers and a ready market (in Nikhilananda, 72).

Vivekananda clearly benefited from the marketability of his message, declaring with characteristic frankness, “I give them spiritually, and they give me money...” (82). He quickly became a commodity in America, his face even appearing on packages of Ceylon tea, although it is unclear whether he received any money from this endorsement (Sen, 33). It seems that Vivekananda at times was preoccupied with the construction of his own international celebrity (see Sil 1997, 91-102). At his most reflective, he realised the artificiality of this image, but acknowledged the necessity of playing by the rules of the Orientalist discourse in order to further his cause. He was well aware of the humility and irony of his endeavour, quipping that “I am not teaching religion. I am selling my brain for
money to help my people” (in Sil 1997, 169). It is unclear how Vivekananda reconciled this self-commodification with his ascetic orientation; Nikhilananda argues that such engagement with transient trends and “earthly nonsense” in America eventually became spiritually exhausting for Vivekananda (80).

**Vivekananda’s Essentialisations of Vedanta**

Some have charged that Vivekananda’s pragmatism came at the expense of an authentic spiritual message (Koppedrayer, 31), and are suspicious of his Vedanta to the extent that it catered to Western expectations. It is certainly true that Vedanta was a potent tool in the re-representation of Hinduism in the West. In his presentation of Vedanta, Vivekananda engaged the most resourcefully with the Orientalist discourse, but also exhibited his greatest complicity with essentialised understandings of India. As aforementioned, during the latter half of the 19th century, Indian thinkers began to use the very same discourses posited by Orientalists to reassert India as an autonomous and active subject. Essentialisations such as ‘spiritual India’ and the textualisation of Hindu religion became powerful hermeneutic tools which were appropriated by indigenous thinkers to posit a unified Hindu religion (R. King, 133).

The dichotomy of ‘spiritual India’ and the ‘material West’ was likewise perpetuated by Vivekananda (Will 1996; U. King 1978). Brekke succinctly summarises how Vivekananda used Orientalist essentialisations of India’s spirituality to affirm its superiority:

His dialogue with the West was not that of the poor and subjugated with the rich and powerful. Vivekananda readily accepted the superiority of the West in terms of economy and technology. But India was rich and powerful in an equally important realm: that of religion and spirituality. This idea in itself was, to a large extent, one that had developed in the West... In his discourse with a Western audience Vivekananda managed to put India in a superior position... His dialogue with the West was a negotiation for India’s position in the world (2002, 49).

This position was negotiated through Vivekananda’s assertion that the material/ spiritual divide was not neutral; indeed, he continually emphasised the Indian ontological belief in the
hierarchical superiority of the spirit (sattva) over matter (rajas) (Brekke 2002, 49). By positing the polarisation of India and the West in terms of spirituality and materiality, Vivekananda claimed superiority for India, but simultaneously reinforced the theoretical dichotomy between these two cultures.

Furthermore, Vivekananda’s presentation of Vedanta catered to the biases of his Western audience. At the World’s Parliament of Religions, and in the 19th century in general, tolerance, equality, and rationality were the progressive spiritual ideals of the time. Vivekananda saw in Vedanta the fulfillment of all these requirements, claiming it to be the only truly egalitarian faith as well as the sole religion wholly compatible with modern scientific discoveries. Koppedrayer has observed how his speeches at the Parliament were eminently aimed at the biases of his mainly Western audience, a rhetorical strategy described by James Ketelaar as “strategic occidentalism” (Seager 1995, 96). As aforementioned, Vivekananda chose not to emphasise certain aspects of Hinduism before his Western audience. Particularly at the World’s Parliament, he avoided mention of texts and complex philosophical concepts (Koppedrayer, 14) in favour of simplified comparisons to Christianity. In this way, he disassociated his Vedanta with any Hindu religious practices which could be pejoratively labeled as irrational or superstitious. Not often acknowledged is the fact that Vivekananda himself practiced devotional forms of Hinduism, and evidently became a devotee of Kali under the influence of Ramakrishna (Nikhilananda, 24). Vivekananda never makes mention of this devotion in his writings and lectures in the West, perhaps due to a fear that “the Kali symbol would not be understood by universal

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30 Vivekananda frequently emphasised the historical gender equality of Vedanta, boasting that several rishis were women (Yogas, 185). Sen argues that his greatest attraction to Advaita Vedanta was its non-sectarian and trans-social philosophy (51).

31 In an address to the World’s parliament, he referred to “the high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes...” (Yogas, 185), and in later lectures claimed that “of all the scriptures of the world, [the Vedanta] is the one scripture the teaching of which is in entire harmony with the results that have been attained by the modern scientific investigations of external nature” (CW III, 184). Many admirers have heralded Vivekananda’s Vedanta as a reconciliation of spirituality and science, particularly quantum physics, due to its affirmation of the infinity of the universe, the indissolubility of souls and energy, and the interconnectedness of all matter (Jitatmananda 1991; Kumar, 128; Mukherjee 2001; Bandyopadhyay 2001; Kashinath 1973).
humanity” (25). It is clear that even in his own self-representation, he emphasised the philosophical aspects of Vedanta, while marginalising the devotional and mystical, in an attempt to appeal to his intellectual Western audiences.

It is worth questioning the extent to which this presentation of Vedanta mimics the Orientalist creation of an authoritative Hinduism which “inevitably marginalizes more localized religious forms” (R. King, 66; Inden 1990, 130) and subordinates the practicing Hindu (R. King, 91). Although Vivekananda insisted that his Vedanta was inclusive and absorptive of all aspects of Hindu tradition, this tolerance also implies an implicit hierarchy, wherein the monism of Advaita Vedanta claims the highest level of spiritual consciousness and the unity behind all forms of worship (WRI, 4-5). Furthermore, although he maintained that all religious paths lead to the divine, he continually discriminated the ‘essentials’ from many ‘non-essential’ popular religious practices (Shamita Basu, 157). Contemporary Indian observers criticised his neglect of bhakti worship (156), and lamented that “to render Hindu dharma respectable there was no need to destroy the core of the Hindu religion” (163). This emphasis on the essence of Hinduism continually subordinates the eclecticism of Indian religious practice in favour of textual origins and philosophical foundations (Halbfass, 234-5). In his desire to posit a unity behind Hindu philosophy, Vivekananda tended to gloss over the real differences in Indian thought (R. King, 137). As well, his mission to locate a foundational text and glorious history for his Vedanta (CW III, 227) can be criticised as an indigenous instance of textualisation and historical appropriation. The framework of Orientalism offers a potent critique of Vivekananda, suggesting that he assumed the role of the elite ‘knower’ of India, subordinating the real variety of Indian religion.

*The Limits of Orientalism: Vivekananda in Context*

32 Contemporary Indian journalists criticised not only the unilateral, but the ineffectual aspects of Vivekananda’s nearly exclusive focus on philosophy. In 1900, the Amrita Bazar Patrika commented that “philosophy’ alone
When examined with the lens of the Orientalist critique, it is clear that Vivekananda utilised the dichotomous essentialisations of his time to his advantage, which in turn served to marginalise aspects of the tradition which he sought to represent. From a postcolonial perspective, Nandy interprets such reforming instincts as tacit acceptance of the Orientalist thesis that Hinduism in manifestation is degenerate (25-6). This is a salient criticism of all forms of Hindu revivalism, but is troubling to the extent that it disallows the authenticity of indigenous resistance and reform movements. Does Vivekananda’s pragmatism necessarily discount the authenticity of his spiritual message? This is a significant question pertaining to many sorts of postcolonial criticism which, in outlining the essentialised and strategic nature of a discourse, imply that this somehow exposes its inauthenticity. For example, the idea of ‘spiritual India’ has surely been constructed and heuristically utilised by Indians as well as Orientalists. However, pointing this out does not in any way prove that India is not spiritual. On the contrary, India is indisputably a nation deeply committed to religion; polemical utilisations of the image of ‘spiritual India’ cannot mitigate its veracity.

In this section, therefore, I examine the authenticity behind Vivekananda’s essentialisations. I contend that Vivekananda’s discourse cannot be dismissed as a form of indigenous Orientalism. Although Orientalist discourses were surely a facet of Vivekananda’s Vedanta, his attempt to consolidate Hindu philosophy under a coherent rubric was not unprecedented nor can it be labeled simply an Orientalist project, as R. King suggests (93). Vivekananda is certainly guilty of essentialising his subject, but such essentialisations did not begin nor will they end with the colonial period. Rather, it is worth questioning the extent to which his Indian religious and intellectual heritage may have contributed to these essentialising tendencies. In the following, I situate Vivekananda in his Indian philosophical and religious context, arguing that his reformulation of Hinduism cannot be comprehensively viewed solely from within the Orientalist critique.

will do very little to Hinduise humanity... To move the heart it is necessary to present a personality” (in R. Chattopadhyaya, 268).
Throughout his life, Vivekananda seems to have been torn between a genuine commitment to his Hindu heritage, and a polemical engagement in the battle for re-representation of India in the eyes of the West. This ambiguity is perhaps best illustrated in his relationship with his guru, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836-1886). Vivekananda claimed throughout his life complete devotion to Ramakrishna, and commonly attributed his mission as service to him (Isherwood 1962, xii). This semi-literate ascetic died without leaving any comprehensive writings, and since his death, Sil has observed that most Ramakrishna scholarship tends to be polemical in its selective analysis of the guru’s often contradictory life (2001, 355-6). Vivekananda certainly took the liberty to reinterpret his master, commenting to Nivedita, “He did not understand himself... But he lived the great life, -and I read the meaning” (Master, 255). As such, he stressed the relevance of Ramakrishna’s life in terms of his own cross-cultural encounter. For example, Vivekananda claimed that his guru was a living embodiment of the inclusive spirit of Vedanta, as he claimed to have achieved Christian and Islamic mystical experiences (A. Sharma 2002, 92). To use Ramakrishna as an exemplar of universal spirituality, Vivekananda would have to ignore his master’s frequent criticisms of Vedanta (Gospel, 133), the suggestion that Christianity and Islam played no ultimate importance in his life (Brekke 2002, 24; Sil 2001, 355), as well as the fact that Ramakrishna never proclaimed any universal unity of spirituality behind his eclectic practices (Halbfass, 235). Furthermore, his claim that

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33 Burke’s insightful analysis of Vivekananda’s global religious mission concludes by acknowledging the conflict between his engagement with the problems of the modern world and his commitment to the purity of the message of Ramakrishna (II, 392-3).

34 The major source for understanding Ramakrishna’s life is the exhaustive and devotional Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (1952), painstakingly recorded by his disciple, Mahendranath Gupta.

35 The claim for Ramakrishna’s exemplary tolerance stems largely from this quotation: “All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo stairs or by a rope...God is one, but His names are many” (Gospel, 111-2). Following a study by Swami Mrigananda, Sil has questioned whether this comment necessarily implies a validation of all world religions, or whether Ramakrishna simply acknowledged his own experience that brahman could be realised through the multiple means of Hindu religious tradition (2001, 355).
Ramakrishna provided the template for a socially engaged Vedanta is similarly tenuous, as the guru disparaged those who engaged in worldly matters (Gospel, 911).\(^{36}\)

It would seem that Halbfass is right in suggesting that most continuities between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda are the projections of the latter (230). As aforementioned, Vivekananda’s spiritual goal was to create a framework for social engagement within the parameters of Vedantic philosophy (Sil 1997, 74-5), using India’s spiritual strengths to ameliorate its material wants. Vivekananda’s use of Ramakrishna was certainly strategic to the extent that it represented an effort to make Vedanta relevant to contemporary challenges. However, such pragmatism should not be judged as inauthenticity. The freedom to interpret one’s religious tradition and spiritual predecessors is one which has been seized by religious reformers at all times, and particularly amongst Vivekananda’s contemporaries in 19th century Bengal. Neo-Hindu reformers such as Roy, Saraswati, and later Aurobindo Ghose and Mahatma Gandhi, all attempted to apply the wealth of their religious tradition to contemporary social and political challenges. To insist on the immutability of religion is to condemn it to irrelevance; Hindu thinkers have often been particularly cognizant of this truth, insisting that “God assumes different forms in different ages to serve the special needs of the time” (Nikhilananda, 33). Following this insight, I assert that Vivekananda’s reinterpretation of his guru may have been strategic and even polemical, but this does not mitigate the authenticity of his Vedanta.

Vivekananda’s frequent essentialisations can be further understood through a consideration of his religiosity. Many Western scholars ignore the fact that Vivekananda retained a genuine commitment to Advaitic philosophy and meditation throughout his life, an oversight which makes it easy to situate him simply within the Orientalist polemic. However, it is evident that Vivekananda’s Indian religious heritage, and not just borrowed Orientalist stereotypes, contributed to his essentialisations. His Vedanta was coloured by a

\(^{36}\) Later Ramakrishna devotees attempt to reconcile their humanitarian projects with the apparent amorality of their guru, but I agree with Jackson that there is little evidence to support such a link (79). It is critical to
genuine and religious assertion of the essentially unified nature of *atman* and *brahman*, which could only be realised by a removal of ignorant consciousness (Flood 1998, 241). Although striving for unity, not dichotomies, his Advaitic faith nevertheless spoke of essences with which the complexity of worldly phenomena could be distilled, just as the Orientalist discourse simplifies the world in terms of essentialised typologies. This emphasis on essential ideas over manifest reality coloured Vivekananda’s approach to every aspect of life. He frequently mentioned his respect for the historical and philosophical origins of world religions, exemplified in his admiration for the teachings of Christ, Mohammed and Siddhartha Guatama (Sen, 59), but condemned much contemporary religious practice that did not live up to his vision of its founders.37 To an extent, therefore, I would suggest that Vivekananda’s frequent essentialisations can be seen as philosophical and spiritual beliefs, not necessarily symptoms of Orientalism.

An interesting illustration of Vivekananda’s essentialising preference for ideals over reality is his perpetuation of the cultural archetypes of male and female. In his rhetoric, he never questioned the fundamental dichotomy of the masculine and the feminine. I have described above how, for Vivekananda, masculinity signified the active, pure and potent possibilities of India; he correspondingly utilised femininity to represent passivity, anti-rationality, weakness, and illusion (Shamita Basu, 159), at one point attributing India’s problems to its being only “inhabited by women and eunuchs” (*CW V*, 86). Such archetypal divisions of gender were common in Orientalist discourse; however, Vivekananda’s denigration of the feminine cannot be blamed simply on Orientalism. Sil explains how his perspective was also typical of his culture’s attitude to the female gender. Although the female principle is exhalted as Shakti, Indian women in practice are often

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37 See Brekke (2002, 55-60) on Vivekananda’s ruthless condemnation of contemporary Buddhism in Sri Lanka as “a perverted version of the Buddha’s teachings” (60). Brekke suggests that this stance led to the breakdown of his friendship with Buddhist revivalist Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), a co-delegate to the World’s Parliament of Religions. Furthermore, Jackson has observed how Vivekananda’s discrimination between Christ and
subjected to domination “in the name of chastity, purity, and spirituality” (1997, 123). Vivekananda’s ambivalent attitude to femininity was surely influenced by Ramakrishna, who repeatedly warned his disciples against the crippling illusions of “women and gold” (Gospel, 438-9, 583-4) yet worshipped his wife as an embodiment of Shakti and devoted his life to the mother goddess, Kali. Evidently, Vivekananda’s views on femininity, although surely influenced by Orientalist essentialisations, were also a result of his Indian cultural heritage.

In the example of Vivekananda’s understanding of femininity, as well as his interpretation of Ramakrishna, it becomes clear that his discourses were often confined by the essentialising tendencies of the Orientalism he wished to negate, as well as the Indian traditions to which he attempted to remain faithful. For this reason, it is problematic to label either his Vedanta or his cultural commentaries as simply forms of indigenous Orientalism. It is true that he was a complicit player in the essentialisations and polarisations which marked the 19th century colonial discourse. However, to unilaterally dismiss his message as an Orientalist construction is to ignore the Indian roots of his thought, as well as the truths that many have found in his spirituality. Vivekananda’s Vedanta was neither wholly indigenous nor completely constructed, but was a result of a complex negotiation with the material and spiritual realities of his time, in an effort to apply his religious understandings to the worlds he encountered. Moreover, it is critical to remember that Orientalism does not have a monopoly on essentialisation; subordinate subjects as well as religions can essentialise, and even use these dichotomies as tools of power.

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Christianity allowed for the aforementioned sharp criticism of Christianity while maintaining Christ within his universalistic religious vision (83).

Vivekananda’s relationship with women was more complex than his essentialised views on femininity. The reality of his social life in the West led to a deep respect for American and British women, and the formation of intimate friendships with a number of women, several of whom he took on as disciples (Sen, 42). The progressive nature of his treatment of women is evident in the controversy which ensued among his coreligionists in India at the news of his free and friendly relations with American women (R. Chattopadhyaya 1999 156-7). At the Belur Math, Vivekananda maintained a traditional segregation of men and women; in his life, he transcended this segregation perpetually (Chowdhury, 135).
Chapter 4. Transcending Orientalism

As I have argued in the above chapter, Said’s study of Orientalism can offer a potent critique, but not a complete evaluation of Vivekananda’s life project. Many scholars have identified the limits of Orientalism, and have attempted to find ways to expand and revise Said’s analysis (Brekenridge and van der Veer 1993; Dallmayr 1996; Prakash 1990, 1995; Sarkar 1994). An important critique that has been levied against Said’s work is that, in positing a totalising coloniser and an innocent indigenous victim, Orientalism disallows the possibility that the Oriental may be an active agent in the multiple power discourses which are played out in the colonial encounter. As such, Said implicitly objectifies the Oriental into a passive role, and perpetuates the theoretical dichotomy between the Western agent and the Eastern subject. Brekenridge and van der Veer have attempted to rectify the coloniser-centric aspects of Said’s study, choosing instead to examine “the intricate interplay of Western and Indian discourses” (van der Veer 1994, 21) and how “colonized subjects are not passively produced by hegemonic projects but are active agents whose choices and discourses are of fundamental importance in the formation of their societies” (Brekenridge and van der Veer, 4-5). This is exactly the complex, critical, and sometimes convoluted approach necessary for a thorough understanding of Vivekananda’s life.

As outlined in chapter one, most studies of Vivekananda situate him as either a tool of the hegemonic Orientalist discourse or a noble spiritual visionary and indigenous campaigner for India’s cultural sovereignty. Vivekananda refused to settle in either of these roles, and instead emerges as simultaneously the victim and the manipulator of his circumstances. In Vivekananda’s rhetoric, the line between colonial victim and colonising victor is blurred. By gaining several followers and considerable international respect; he boasted to have “made the white man my horse” (in Sil 1997, 162-3) and to have “conquered America before I visited that country” with “the tide of Vedanta which is flooding the world” (in Sil 1997, 158-9). Although these claims are certainly exaggerated, Vivekananda’s success in the West nevertheless functioned as a challenge to the
relationship of victimisation between the Indian subject and the Western coloniser. An examination of Vivekananda as actively negotiating the boundaries of such categories permits him the power of authentic agency which is not possible if he remains an inert victim of Orientalism.

By admiring biographers, Vivekananda has been romanticised as “the authentic representative of the Hindu soul in postcolonial discourse” (Sil 2001, 359), a claim which could easily be dismissed out of hand, but which I intend to address seriously. I suggest that one legacy of Vivekananda is as an exemplary 19th century ‘Hindu soul’. By no means do I assert that he represents an authoritative and ‘pure’ indigenous subject, but rather I believe that his life embodies the complex, and often compromised, predicament of the colonial subject, who is influenced by multiple contemporary essentialisations which posit irreconcilable differences between the East and the West, and who finds herself on the front lines of these conceptual conflicts in her liminal position between cultures. Furthermore, in its multiple influences and endeavours, I contend that Vivekananda’s life can serve as a challenge to the essentialisations of the East and the West, a dichotomy which Said’s text is complicit in maintaining. Thus, Vivekananda’s person not only embodied a refutation of Orientalism, but also the many complexities of colonialism. In this chapter, I turn to the theories of Ashis Nandy and Homi Bhabha, both of whom have examined the Orientalist discourse as multilateral, and have revisioned the colonial subject as liminal and creative. Their work is a starting point allowing for a more contextualised and fluid consideration of Vivekananda; from this perspective I am able to incorporate his multicultural influences and shed light on the philosophical unity of his material and spiritual projects.

**Vivekananda as Bicultural Self**

In *The Intimate Enemy* (1983), Ashis Nandy outlines the psychological tensions experienced by those occupying a position between West and East. In this text, a picture of the colonial subject emerges which is marked not by his purity or traditionalism, but by his
constituted nature. Nandy portrays the indigenous subject as conquered both territorially as well as psychologically; he laments that Orientalist essentialisations have become internalised and entrenched in the Indian mind. The colonial subject is therefore always marked by a bicultural reality, in which the antagonistic battle of colonialism becomes an intimate affair between the indigenous and foreign aspects of his psyche (67-72). Although Nandy concedes the inevitability of this bicultural reality, his study portrays it as a tragedy. The reason is primarily due to the dilemma of the colonial subject: “he could not be both Western and Indian; he could be either Western or Indian” (71).

Although used in this context to describe the quandary of colonial rulers, this internal struggle is also evident in the life of Vivekananda. His person and philosophy were constituted of multiple cultural elements; however, the societies in which he lived mitigated his ability to harmonise these influences. Never able to define whether he was Western or Indian, there is evidence that he experienced the psychological conflict of biculturality. Vivekananda often despairled at the inevitable effect that contact with the West had had on his person, distancing him from traditional Indian culture. Nivedita comments that “Vivekananda considered Ramakrishna to be the ideal of the old time in India suddenly burst into bloom... it was at once the greatness and the tragedy of my own Master’s life that he was not of this type... he was the modern mind in all its completeness” (in Sen, 12). In the following, I examine Vivekananda as a ‘modern mind’ negotiating multiple cultures and discourses, and marked by a bicultural reality. I do not wish to add my support to this superficial dichotomy, but it is worth taking seriously the extent to which the constructed conceptions of ‘the East’ and ‘the West’ coincided and conflicted in Vivekananda’s life.

Western scholars tend to overlook the extent to which Vivekananda was influenced by Western thought. Raychaudhuri has provided a thorough assessment of Vivekananda’s formative years, highlighting how his family was deeply influenced by the multicultural and

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39 To illustrate the bicultural subject, Nandy uses the figure of Rudyard Kipling, whom Nandy claims suffered psychologically due to his inability to reconcile “the East and the West within him” (71). A central argument of Nandy’s text is that colonialism was equally damaging to the psyche of the coloniser (xv).
modernising elements of 19th century Bengal, but nevertheless maintained a traditional Hindu piety (1988, 221-3). As an undergraduate, Vivekananda specialised in the philosophy and history of Europe, and enjoyed “exploring the affinities and contrasts between Sanskrit and European literature” (225). His intellectual life was marked by philosophical conflict between Western rationalism and Indian theism. Although the West has no monopoly on rationality, for Vivekananda, it was the work of European philosophers which engendered a tension with Indian religious belief. Raychaudhuri describes a painful battle “between reason and faith” resulting from reading Mill, Hume, and Spencer (1988, 229).

Vivekananda’s skepticism stayed with him throughout his life, as is documented in his refusal to immediately accept Ramakrishna as an avatar (Sen, 25), his frequent questioning of Ramakrishna’s mystical abilities (Nikhilananda, 14-6), and continual references to his agnosticism (Isherwood, xiii; Nikhilananda, 1) and atheism (Gospel, 297). Conspicuous Western inclinations noted by contemporary critics were his adoption of the T-shirt, his use of English in everyday conversation, and his habit of chewing tobacco (R. Chattopadhyaya, 93).

Such Western influences were prevalent in 19th century Bengal, which was far removed from traditional India. It has been noted that even in his homeland, Vivekananda socialised mostly with the Westernised elite, and was alienated from traditional village life (R. Chattopadhyaya, 122; Dhar, 133-8). The first Ramakrishna math was predominately Western educated (Chowdhury, 124-5), and Western philosophy was a substantial part of their daily studies, following Vivekananda’s insistence that they “should broaden their outlook by assimilating the thought-currents of the world” (Nikhilananda, 38). Such a cosmopolitan outlook was rapidly advancing in 19th century Bengal; consequently, Vivekananda’s attempt to assimilate Western reason and Indian faith was a common feature of the Bengal Renaissance (Williams, 105-6; Kopf 1969; Schwab 1984). The tensions implicit in such a conceptual convergence were no less acute by virtue of their predominance. There is evidence that these bicultural influences were problematic for
Vivekananda, and affected his ability to completely identify with, or be accepted by, either India or the West. From the ship which brought him back to India after his first visit to America and Europe, Vivekananda mused, “[w]hat am I? Asiatic, European, or American? I feel a curious medley of personalities in me” (in Bose, 297).

The real conflicts of this ‘curious medley’ became evident upon this homecoming. It seems that from this point onwards, Vivekananda never felt fully at home in either India, America, or England. This discomfort is perhaps the result of the stress of embodying different roles in different cultures. In a speech upon his return, he admitted that “I was one man in America and another here” (Sen, 39), explaining that he was worshipped in India and reviled in America. Much evidence suggests the opposite, however: although he received a hero’s welcome (Jackson, 30); his arrival in India was marked by considerable controversy and challenge to his self-proclaimed success (R. Chattopadhyaya, 264-5).

Around this time, his detractors in India and abroad, including orthodox Hindus, Christian missionaries and American intellectuals, began to exchange criticisms of Vivekananda. In 1897, a pamphlet was published by The Christian Literature Society for India, which was meant as an open denunciation of Vivekananda’s unsettling claims such as those that “before ten years elapse a vast majority of English people will be Vedantists” (in SVHG, ii). In response, this pamphlet presents criticisms of Vedanta, refutations of its success abroad, as well as allegations that Vivekananda was disqualified from teaching or studying Vedanta by virtue of his Sudra caste. Furthermore, Shamita Basu chronicles how members of the growing nationalist movement charged him with Westernisation (2002, 162-3).

Following Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks (1967), Bhabha argues that a central dilemma of the colonial and postcolonial subject is that when she takes on any characteristics of the colonial ruler, she is quickly denounced as a “misfit- a grotesque mimicry” (75). Fanon’s title aptly summarises the challenges faced by anyone who embodies a “disavowal of difference” (Bhabha, 75) between the coloniser and the subject. It seems that Vivekananda experienced such a backlash by his contemporaries, who were
unsettled by his liminal position between cultures. The resultant feelings of alienation and pressure in India likely contributed to his decision to return to America after only two years in India (Jackson, 32); however, this visit was far less successful than his first (32), and he reflected that upon return, the West appeared “like hell” to him (R. Chattopadhyaya, 270).

Sil argues that his last years in India were coloured by isolation and frustration (1997, 26). By the end of his life, it seems that the bicultural influences of his life culminated in an inability to fully devote himself to either India or the West.

As I have demonstrated throughout this study, for Vivekananda, the dichotomy between India and the West could be summarised in terms of the divide between the spiritual and the material. Interestingly, in Vivekananda’s life, this dichotomy was echoed, and often engendered considerable conflict. Although I have argued in chapter two that his material and spiritual missions were philosophically linked, towards the end of his life, the projects of social change in India and international religious teaching became practically inconsistent. As Sen explains, Vivekananda was motivated simultaneously by a “deep commitment to this world and what seems to be its very opposite, the strong penchant for world-renunciation” (64). He often recounted how, as a child, he had reoccurring dreams competing between visions of material success and saintly asceticism (Sil 1997, 58).

It seems these visions were never fully reconciled. Vivekananda echoed Krishna’s counsel that any work must be performed without attachment to results (Yogas, 188), since “the world is like a dog’s curly tail, and people have been striving to straighten it out for hundreds of years; but when they let go, it curls up again” (486). His frequent emotional outbursts and the intensity of his commitment to evangelism and philanthropy suggest that he rarely achieved such impassive non-attachment. Contemporaries did not hesitate to criticise this inconsistency (Dhar, 137), and he himself was the first to admit that “the way to God is the opposite to that of the world” (Letters, 96). It is clear that Vivekananda embodied the meeting of multiple influences: Indian and Western; spiritual and material.
However, following Nandy’s examination of the conflicts of biculturality, it seems that Vivekananda, in his physical and philosophical transgression of difference, also experienced the culturally conditioned tensions between these dichotomies.

**Hybridisation of East and West, Spiritual and Material**

In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate my cycle of freedom (Fanon in Bhabha, 8-9).

Echoing Nandy’s arguments, Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994) identifies a similarly constituted nature of the colonial subject, focusing not on individual psychology but on literature. This text argues that colonialism produces a phenomenon which Bhabha calls hybridity (112), wherein cultural meaning is continually negotiated by agents at the margins of culture through self-conscious relationships with ‘the other’ (12). This text has a decidedly different tone than that of Nandy. It does not lament the hybridisation of indigenous culture in reference to a pure pre-colonial past. Rather, to Bhabha, an essentialised past is irrelevant to the complexities of the present; furthermore, a hybrid reality is more authentic than historical mythologisations (9). Although the experience of hybridity may be alienating, it is also liberating and creative, since Bhabha contends that cultural meaning is forged and defined through “the cutting edge of translation and negotiation- the in-between space” (38) of cultural contact and conflict.

Bhabha’s theory allows for a reassessment of Vivekananda not as an Orientalist puppet, or as a relic from India’s past, but as a complex, creative, and authentic agent. Thus, although Vivekananda displays the characteristic “‘unhomely’ condition of the modern world” (Bhabha, 11), it is clear that his liminal position between the cultures of India, America, and England was incredibly productive. This productivity is evident both in his material accomplishments, and his success in challenging the discursive dichotomies of his time through his embodied hybridity. He understood that despite the trials of his liminality,

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40 Sil argues that Vivekananda’s struggle between his asceticism and his physical nature reached a point of crisis
cultural conflict was ultimately creative: “We know that two or more forces must come into collision to produce motion. It is the clash of thought, the differentiation of thought, that produces motion” (WRI, 12). Furthermore, Vivekananda’s travels between India and the West gave him the perspective to develop an awareness of the superficiality of the essentialisations that both cultures posit. Having been forced to play each role, he realised that the stereotypes of the Western mlechha, and the “slave-like dark-skinned native... were fake because they were superficial and took no note of the fundamental human reality under the surface of external conduct” (Raychaudhuri 1988, 268). His very life can be seen as the attempt to harmonise the dichotomies between East and West. Bhabha envisions a central function of hybridity to be its potential to contest the authoritative discourses of the time (193). Similarly, Nandy argues that resistance to essentialisations implies an understanding of their artificiality, which is the first step to their transcendence.

When psychological and cultural survival are at stake, polarities such as the ones discussed here do break down and become partly irrelevant... When this happens, there emerges in the victim of a system a vague awareness of the larger whole which transcends the system’s analytic categories and/or stands them on their head (113).

The creative and transcendent aspects of Vivekananda’s hybrid life are the most clear in his religious mission. Neither Nandy nor Bhabha apply their theories to the spiritual aspect of indigenous self-assertion, an unfortunate oversight which is common in postcolonial scholarship. As aforementioned, most studies of Vivekananda focus either on a decontextualised account of his spiritual vision, or alternatively his worldly engagement in India’s social and international struggles. Although he himself rarely overcomes this discursive dichotomy, Nandy complains that “Modern scholars of course have their obligation to their own disciplines; they cannot afford to grant the convertibility between life styles and ideologies. They have to reconcile the self-created ‘contradiction’ between the materialist and the idealist India by unmasking one of the Indias as false” (82). I do not wish to represent either the material or the spiritual Vivekananda as false. Just as

in his relationship with Nivedita (1997, 135-8).

41 Mlechha is “a term used disparagingly for foreigners by orthodox Hindus” (Kapoor, 389).
*Orientalism* argues that it is contemporary scholarship which perpetuates the thesis of the irreconcilable division between East and West, today’s scholars are partially to blame for the perpetuation of the dichotomy between the spiritual and the material.

It is therefore necessary to approach the boundaries of theoretical dichotomies in order to understand Vivekananda in all his influences and manifestations. If my discussion at times blends the meanings of Vivekananda’s spiritual and more worldly writings, it is in an attempt to allow for the possibility that his spiritual and material understanding of the world were not separate. Scholars have pointed out the inseparable link between spiritual and material experience in Vivekananda’s thought (Muralikrishna 1991). This is summarised by his proclamation that “secular and spiritual knowledge... are the same... knowledge in its different stages of gradual development” (*CW* IV, 434) and personally practiced through *jnana yoga*, which Vivekananda described as the use of pure reason to realise the ultimate spiritual goal of *moksha* (Rambachan 1987, 280).

It is my contention that Vivekananda attempted to transcend the dichotomies between material and spiritual, and between India and the West, in the very medium of his religious message. It was in his commitment to Vedanta that Vivekananda most thoroughly attempted to reconcile the dichotomies that defined his time. At its most inspired, his spirituality strove to transcend the essentialisations posited by both Western and Indian society, as well as the spiritual and the material worlds, as his message persistently spoke of the unity behind diversity.

If you go below the surface, you will find that unity between man and man, between races and races, high and low, rich and poor, gods and men, and men and animals. If you go deep enough, all will be seen as only variations of the One, and he who has attained this conception of oneness, has no more delusion (*CW* II, 153).

To Vivekananda, the monism of Advaita Vedanta was a concrete belief in a unified reality which lay behind all conditioned appearances. This universal reality could only be realised through a spread of Vedantic teachings around the world, in an effort to unite a humanity

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42 Elsewhere, he includes women in his inclusive vision, proclaiming that “there is no distinction of sex in the soul” (*Letters*, 112).
that was marked by manifest difference and inequality. Occasionally, Vivekananda even asserted that the spread of Vedanta was necessary to unite humanity in the spirit of equality to usher in the satya yuga (CW III, 197-8; CW V 31). Vivekananda insisted that “the Vedanta is not satisfied to end in dualism, but continues to search for the final unity...” (CW III, 5). In promoting the universal and unifying message of Vedanta, his spiritual mission ultimately sought to override the dichotomous discourses of his era.

In speaking of the insidious nature of Orientalist essentialisations, Nandy posits that “none of them is true but all of them are realities” (xiv). This assertion echoes the Vedantic understanding that the world of maya is phenomenologically but not transcendentally real, and its manifestations are of consequence to one who cannot see beyond conditioned reality (Jackson, 70; Victor, 123-4). Vivekananda’s approach to truth and reality was no doubt influenced by the Advaitic belief that

[t]he world was only apparently real but not ultimately so. In other words, the world remained real so long as we did not possess the insight to realize that it was actually not so. Our worldly perceptions, conditioned as they were by nature, time and space, did not allow us to see beyond the world. Obviously, one could not objectively judge the world while remaining in it (Sen, 48).

Vivekananda, however, was adamant in his commitment to the truth of human existence; his personal religious practice, as well as his public formulation of Vedanta, ultimately aimed to transcend the essentialisations of conditioned reality. At times, Vivekananda approached this insight, realising the superficiality of conditioned reality summarised in cultural essentialisations; remarkably, he achieved it both through the Yogic practice of meditation as well as his mundane life experiences. In the non-dualist philosophy of Vedanta, he came the closest to realising the ultimate unity behind the contemporary constructions of difference between India and the West. However, his assertion of world unity was a result of his travels and practical experiences, which gave him a great measure of perspective on the construction of essentialisations. In his creative and liminal position between East and West, spiritual and material, he was able to envision the harmonisation and transcendence of these bifurcated realities.
Conclusion

Although admirers may argue otherwise, Vivekananda was only human. He remained in the world, and perhaps a bit too much in the world for the tastes of his fellow sannyasis. Although his spiritual vision asserted the true unity behind the polarities of East/ West and spiritual/ material, the impossibility of total objectivity in conditioned reality plagued Vivekananda’s life. He loved to tell the story of the frog in the well, who thought his small puddle represented the entire universe (Yogas, 184). An examination of Vivekananda’s life and writings reveals that he was continually bound by the essentialised dichotomies of the Orientalist discourse as well as his own Indian tradition. Towards the end of his life, fissures became apparent between his simultaneous identities as material activist and spiritual sannyasi, Western intellectual and Indian philosopher. He could not always harmonise these facets of his complex identity in a society which posited their irreconcilability.

The last years of his life were spent in ascetic isolation and a retreat to the religion which had provided him the closest glimpse of transcendence. Some have interpreted the quiescence of his final years as a rejection of his larger social and religious visions (Sil 1997, 147). It seems that Vivekananda felt that he had compromised his spiritual truth due to his worldly engagement. In 1899, he confessed to Nivedita that he had lost the ability to meditate, remarking with a smile, “I have lost it all- lost it all for you Mlechhas!” (in Sil 1997, 148). His words reveal a growing worry that “success would have led me astray... and I would have lost the truth that I am a sanyasi” (in Sen, 97). Following the prediction of Ramakrishna, it appears that he chose his moment of death (R. Chattopadhyaya, 282-4): on the evening of July 4, 1902, he slipped into an unconscious state, his body crippled with diabetes and an apparent cerebral hemorrhage (Eck 2001, 104; Sil 1997, 141). His last years fulfilled his own assertion that “life is ever expanding, contraction is death” (Letters, 102).

43 Upon return to India, many of his coreligionists criticised his worldly compromises and accused him of ritual impurity. This orthodox sentiment culminated in his being denied entry to the Dakshineswar Ramakrishna temple (Sen, 40-1).
In the final assessment, Vivekananda emerges as a dynamic figure intimately engaged in the realities and truths of the worlds he inhabited. He was motivated throughout his life by a desire for unification in terms of religious consciousness and human existence. For him, these material and spiritual goals were not inconsistent. Indeed, his mission in the West can be seen as an attempt to break down the spiritual and material boundaries of human experience, by personally re-representing India and Hinduism, and by spreading the universal message of Vedanta. It was this transgression of boundaries which Vivekananda hoped would lead to a relationship of equality and respect between India and the West. I have argued that Vivekananda used his person as a medium for the embodiment of a new vision of Hinduism on the world’s stage. It is clear, however, that Vivekananda’s life also embodied both the conflicts of colonialism, as he negotiated the ambiguous space between cultures, as well as a challenge to Orientalism, as he refuted dichotomous theses of human reality.

I have argued that Vivekananda cannot be seen simply as an innocent resister of colonial discourses; in fact, he found that by utilising and manipulating Orientalist essentialisations, he could gain a receptive audience for his message. This engagement in the conditioned reality of the world at times appears to compromise the authenticity of his spiritual mission. However, this postulation is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it demands of religion an essentialised immutability, whereas Vivekananda’s Vedanta was a living, evolving tradition which resisted the reifying efforts of Orientalists. Furthermore, it relegates every subject to the role of either submissive sannyasi or Orientalist imperialist. Vivekananda was neither of these. He chose to “reject the model of the gullible, hopeless victim of colonialism caught in the hinges of history” (Nandy, xv); instead, he seized the daunting challenge of representing his own culture, embarking on a creative mission to reformulate the relationship between India and the West. In doing so, Vivekananda did not hesitate to transcend the boundaries of the material, the spiritual, and the cultural, even if it meant getting his hands dirty along the way.
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Curriculum Vitae
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