Cleopatra: the Image of Indian Sati
— Immortal Longing and Social Stigma —

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Can we call Shakespeare’s Cleopatra a “Sati”? Human fantasy varies widely and keeping this simple fact in mind let us consider Cleopatra as Shakespeare looks at her and find out how she can be a “Sati”.

Cleopatra’s most striking final speech towards Antony “Husband, I come” (5.2.281) may appear as if she were a loving wife dying for love and preparing for self-sacrifice and many find in it a clue of her Sati-hood. If we consider her suicide not that of a mistress but of an affectionate wife, we may compare the case with the term “Sati”. Cleopatra’s death can also be compared with the Sati which is directly related to the devotion of a wife only to her husband in Indian society. By her death Cleopatra tries to demonstrate a perfect wife-husband relationship she perhaps never achieves in life. Cleopatra’s death proves her status of the true wife, as opposed to Octavia’s status as the lawful wife of Antony. Death is the witness of her relationship “as a wife”....and “she goes to her ‘husband’”... (Lloyd 90). This scenario somehow we can compare with the ancient meaning of Sati.

As cited by Leslie, Sati means that “the husband is to be followed always (sahānuyātavy [ah]); like the body by its shadow, like the moon by moonlight, like a thundercloud by lightening” (Leslie 191-94). The alternative spelling of the word “sati” is “suttee” (Fludernik 411-37). It usually refers to an Indian custom where a widow burns herself in the funeral pyre of her husband “to follow him into the afterlife” and “to join him in death” (Hawley 191); or to atone for her sins, her husband’s sins, her parents’ sins, and her husband’s parents’ sins. In addition, the sati would receive a reward of 35,000,000 years in heaven with her husband (Leslie 191-94) because the human body has that number of hairs on it (The Friend of India).

Banerjee, P told of the “Heroic chastity projected by the Hindu widow who burned herself alive with her

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dead husband in order to prove her chastity” (Banerjee 3-4). Sati is classical iconography of heroic chastity. Cleopatra’s suicide with “an immortal longing” to get new pleasures again with Antony in another world (5.2. 228-29) might be comparable with the old Indian custom. The term ‘Sati’ is a Sanskrit word that means “virtuous woman,” but is used principally to refer to the faithful wife who “becomes sati” through self-immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband. There is no doubt that Cleopatra’s love for Antony is genuine and deep. She decides to commit suicide because life without Antony is meaningless for her. This bond she shares with Antony is connected with the image of the “faithful wife” and also similar to the woman who “becomes Sati” through self-immolation on the funeral pyre. By her self-sacrifice, Cleopatra proves the ultimate loyalty of her love, and establishes her relation with Antony as a “Sati”, where a woman is so devoted to her husband that they live together and die together (Pativrata). Cleopatra tells Charmian and Iras at Antony’s death that she would follow the Roman Custom and commit suicide to build up her relation as a true devoted wife. The devotion of a Sati for her husband has “existed long before, since her childhood on” (Hawley 41). Cleopatra believes that she can only be reunited with Antony in death, and that is preferable to life without him. This relation is so deep that if one departs it is often hard for the other to continue living, particularly for the woman. David Daiches sums up by saying, ‘in death Cleopatra can now call Antony her husband, which she could not in life” (Daiches 357). Her death becomes the final expressions of her love to Antony. Many European travellers in India by the 16th century wrote about the practice of Sati. According to some reports, widow burning was viewed as a sort of wedding ceremony. Cleopatra’s last piece of speech seems like a ritual of the widow who is going to perform ‘Sati’. It might be possible that Shakespeare was aware of the Indian practice. Pieter Gielisz van Ravesteyn, a Dutch traveller in India from 1608 to 1614, observed Sati as a connubial practice “and the widow went and lay down beside him, kissing him and embracing him” (74-75). Many other Europeans saw the widow as a joyous bride preparing for a wedding. Methwold noted that the melody accompanying the Hindu widow’s journey was like a wedding strain, “in the same measure and the strain they were occasioned as wedding” (28). Caesar Frederick compared the Sati to a “Venetian bride going to her nuptials” (10). These repeated references to weddings, brides, and nuptials romanticized both the act of Sati and the central figure of the Hindu widow which bears a resemblance with Cleopatra.
Cleopatra’s death scene also seems like a ceremonial preparation for a royal marriage. Before her death, she prepares herself as if she was going to meet with her husband.

Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
Immortal longings in me;

................................................

Yare, yare, good Iras, quick – methinks I hear
Antony call. I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act. (5.2. 282-287)

We find a strong evidence of similarity with the description by Dutch merchant Francisco Pelsaert’s narrative about Sati in Cleopatra’s preparation for death. As Pelsaert narrates, the Sati “goes and bathes, according to the daily custom, puts on her finest clothes, her jewels, and the best ornaments she has, adorning herself as if it was her wedding day” (79-80).

Cleopatra proves that she is stronger in her death than her life. The Bengali essayist Shib Chunder Bose was an eye witness of such a Sati ritual. During his childhood he came directly to a trial by fire when his mother informed with tears in her eyes that his aunt was to become a Sati. He went to his aunt’s bedroom and saw her draped in a red silk sari, the part in her hair coated with a thick layer of vermillion paste, her feet dyed lacquer, chewing her betel as if she were a young bride on her wedding day. A lamp of clarified butter burned in front her. She appeared to be “Wrapped in ecstasy devotion....The perfect composure with which she underwent this fiery ordeal fully convinced all that she was real Suttee, fit to abide with her husband in Boykonto (Lord Visnu’s Paradise)” (Bose 273-274).

Similarly, Sheila M. Smith finds in Cleopatra’s death scene a ceremonial preparation for a royal marriage. Cleopatra’s death signifies her immense freedom to rejoin with Antony because life without him is quite impossible for her. For her, death appears as the road to freedom. The world is not large enough to contain their love. Love is a creative force both for Antony and Cleopatra, in their minds and the centre of the play is the marriage of true minds. They each have the other’s heart. “Death is not negation, but a liberation that finds new heaven, new earth, and an assurance of a reunion which along gratifies immortal longings” (Stauffer 248).

Sati is an ancient Hindu culture but the official records in the early nineteenth century reveal that Sati was not limited to the more prosperous. The practice was found among many castes and at every social level (Mukherjee 244-50, Nandy 1-33). The practice of killing a favourite wife and to bury her with the husband was also a practice in many parts of the old world such as the Thracians, the Scythians, the ancient Egyptians, the Chinese and peoples of Oceania and Africa. Its stated purpose was to expiate the sins of both husband and wife and to ensure the couple’s reunion beyond the grave. Or, perhaps, it was encouraged by the low regard in which widows were held. The practice was not, however, universal throughout Hindu history.

In the past, Hindu women from royal families used to burn themselves unchecked in the name of sati. Akbar, for the first time, successfully insisted that no woman could commit sati without the specific permission of his Kotwals. Once the Kotwals got to know about it, they were instructed to delay the woman's decision for as long as
possible and to offer pensions, gifts and rehabilitative help to prevent women from committing sati. However, the practice continued in the areas outside Agra. In their own sphere of influence the Portuguese, Dutch and French banned sati but efforts to stamp out sati were formalised only under Lord William Bentinck after 1829. (Lawyers Collective)

The practice was banned in the Bengal Presidency by the then governor Lord William Bentinck on Dec 4, 1829. The ban was challenged in the courts and the case went to the Privy Council in London and was upheld in 1832. Other company territories also banned it shortly although the original ban in Bengal was fairly uncompromising. Sati remained legal in some princely states (in India) for a time after it had been abolished in British controlled territories. Jaipur banned the practice in 1846. Nepal continued Sati rituals well into the 20th century. On the Indonesian island of Bali, Sati was practised by the aristocracy as late as 1905 and until Dutch colonial rule fully terminated this horrible custom. (Sharma 43 – 56).

In India isolated cases of voluntary Sati have occurred into the 20th century and even today taking place now and then in remote villages. Raja Rammohun Roy, who is considered the father of modern India (Weinberger – Thomas 41), had the greatest contribution towards abolishing the Sati system from the society. He cited a wide range of texts – Vedas, Smritis, Puranas and Bhagavad Gītā to expose the ambiguous status of widow burning ‘Sati’ and the meaning of ‘Sati’ (Roy 345). The Indian Hindu epic Mahābhārata also gives the description of the social cultural aspects of castes, duties of men and women, dietary laws, dharma (religion), gift-giving, conduct, inheritance laws, duties of kings, taxation, war, good governance and so forth (Buck ix-xxiii; Buitenen xvi-xxiii). Similarly, The Rāmāyana (7), composed in approximately the third century B.C., presented many such illustrations. Its ideals of wifely virtues were rigid: “A woman’s first recourse is her husband, her second is her son, her third her kinsmen. And she has no forth in this world” (Pollock, 2007, 560) or “A husband is a woman’s deity” (Pollock, 2005, 215). The Man-ava-Dhrama-Cāstra (A.D. 500) is the text that outlined the laws of Manu and very important for the foundation of Hindu society. Laws of Manu discussed rites of ceremonial purification, rituals of penance and expiations, inheritance laws, masculine responsibilities and the duties of woman. Instead of ‘the practice of Sati’ (Sati Pratha), Manu’s laws said that “the Hindu woman has to live under the benign care of her father when a maiden, of her husband when married, and of her sons when she is a widow” (Manu 130).

The origin and practice of the ritual of Sati is a mystery and cannot be explained properly except by relating it to the social life of Hindus and their tradition (Datta 1). The Hindu widows as a consummate, though inimitable, exemplar of the patriarchal fantasies were projected in European conduct books, sermons, homilies and marriage manuals. The Hindu wives’ chastity and self renunciation seemed to be the unreachable destination of the rigorous discipline of the good wife as suggested by Catholic and Puritan conduct books. The travelogues thus manifested the profound ambivalence that marks later colonial attitudes to the practice of Sati (Mani 392-408). Shakuntala Rao Shastri, in her "Women in Sacred Laws" very aptly describes the pitiable condition of women before the British came to India.

True it is that anyone who has witnessed the pathetic condition of women in India at the dawn of British rule cannot but be shocked at it: the enforced child marriage, the exposure of female children, putting to death female
children by throwing them at the junction of the Ganges and the sea, the violence used to make women follow the Sati rite and thus end their miserable existence, the shameful treatment accorded to a widow, the (in)famous ‘Kulinism’ (aristocracy) which made marriage a profession rather than a sacrament, made woman not only an object of pity but many a woman sighed in the secret recess for her heart and wished that she had never been born a woman in this unfortunate country. (Shastri 171).

Sati means loyalty to a husband but in the sense of burning widows was an aberration. ‘Sati’ is the duty of a virtuous wife, largely practiced in Hindu upper caste society. The self sacrifice of a woman is considered as the perfect example of wifely virtue. By immolating herself, the widow purportedly enables herself as well as her deceased husband to enjoy ‘heavenly pleasure’ and even according to some scriptural texts, to escape thereafter the cycle of birth and death (Mani 1). Pompa Banerjee, however, mentions that historians and Brahmin Scholars have maintained that widow burning was the exception rather than a rule in 1500s (73).

Being a powerful tragic love story, Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, contains all features of his Roman play. The play contains all the tragic elements of such plays including most prominent and high ranking /outstanding figures from history. The tragic situation exists from the beginning of the play because there is no hope for a happy ending. Even in the end, the play shows a failure of human freedom. This determinism in the fate of the characters could be considered as the essence of tragedy. In *Antony and Cleopatra* the deaths of the title characters are, at least in their own imaginations, fully compensated by the victory they celebrate in their worldly defeat. As Croce says, “The tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra is composed of the violent sense of pleasure, in its power to bind and to dominate, coupled with a shudder at its abject effects of dissolution and death” (440) This is especially true if we recollect Bradley’s phrase - “Its splendour dazzles us; but when splendour vanishes, we do not mourn, as we mourn for the love of Othello or Romeo that a thing so bright and good should die. And the fact that we mourn so little saddens us” (304). Audiences don’t mourn for them; they admire them by being aware that these two lovers do it as a kind of proof of the concept that,

A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell. (Sonnet 129).

We, the audience, neither mourn for them nor reject in the end and become involved easily with these two lovers. Aristotle’s theory of catharsis assumes that theatrical pain and suffering effect an emotional connection with the audience in such a way that a release of pent-up emotion can occur (Marshall 403). Nothing could be further from the truth than Shaw’s remark that “Shakespeare gives us a faithful picture of the soldier’s broken down debauchery, and the typical wanton in whose arms such men perish.”

The play has a direct relation to the political, social and cultural environment of the contemporary world and the tension between the east and the west. The west is represented by the Roman Empire and Octavius Caesar, and the east by Cleopatra and her Egypt. But at the end of the play the conflict between the two cultures turns into a relation between the East and the West with taking the control of the empire by
Octavius Caesar as the leader of the world’s sole superpower, who later become the first Roman Emperor, Augustus. As Loomba says “Shakespeare’s presentation of Cleopatra’s character, that is both Egyptian and a gypsy, but it also identifies Egypt as the ‘East’; more importantly, it plays upon a dichotomy between Rome and Egypt in which each is defined by its difference from other” (Loomba 116). It is the story of love, lust and political intrigue which has the capacity to capture the imagination of the audience generation after generation. The opening scene of the play presents a clear concept about the vast differences between Egypt and Rome, Antony’s change from a powerful soldier into an infatuated lover and the potential antagonism between Antony and Octavius Caesar. We come to learn more with Ridley that “The story of Antony’s relation to Cleopatra is not essentially dramatic at all; there is no progress, merely an oscillation. Under various influences – loyalty to Octavia, loyalty to Rome, and, by far the strongest, love of being a great fighting general and leading his adoring troops – Antony swings like a compass needle, but comes to rest always pointing to the inevitable north” (Ridley xiv).

Antony’s character becomes more complex due to his two great passions, his ambition of honour as a powerful ruler and his passionate love for Cleopatra, both of which are fundamentally impossible to reconcile. He is one of the Triumvirs of Rome, who stands for Roman values, honour, nobility and courage but due to his intense love for Egyptian Queen Cleopatra he has started to neglect his duty as a soldier. The opening scenes of the play establish the basic conflict and prepare the readers for what is to come. Social and political concerns attempt to pull Antony back into the orbit of society from which he has separated himself completely. This critical struggle is aptly summed up by A. P. Riemer: “Antony and Cleopatra can be read as the fall of a great general, betrayed in his dotage by a treacherous strumpet, or else it can be viewed as a celebration of transcendental love” (cited in Fitz 1994: 182). One part of Antony endorses the soldier’s ideal and urges him to return to his public life, recapture his reputation as peerless warrior and become the magnificent man he used to be. The other part yields to private emotion, the all-consuming passion for Cleopatra and urges him to love in grand manner, to deny and exclude the outside world and create a lover’s paradise when we read the following dialogue:

Cleopatra If it be love indeed, tell me how much.
Antony There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned.
Cleopatra I’ll set a bourn how far to be beloved.
Antony Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth. (1.1. 14-17)

These opening words they speak to each other sound like Romantic ranting. “The love of Antony and Cleopatra carries them to the borders of ordinary life and at least in their eyes, beyond this world into the realm of death” (Cantor164). The conflict between reason and passion has been indeed presented in the opening scene and continues to the end of the play. According to Philo, love is nothing but lust and he speaks about Cleopatra in a contemptuous tone. Both love and lust are characterized by their relationship that makes us to feel awestruck. But when Antony speaks of love he acquires a noble quality. He replies to Cleopatra “There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned.” which means true love cannot be calculated or measured. He does not care for Rome or for the Roman Empire by refusing to acknowledge his responsibility as a solider or to the kingdom he shows it is nothing as compared to this love. The opening
scene holds a microcosmic image of the whole play by which readers become alert to what is going to happen in the play.

*Antony and Cleopatra* is a powerful love story which serves a larger purpose to drive an action of the political and cultural conflicts of the play. Love is as strong as death. Love has destroyed Egypt as it did Troy. And the love between Antony and Cleopatra is tragic and there is no way which could make them happy. Obviously the seeds of their tragedy lie in the conflict of their desires. Unlike purely private lovers, Antony and Cleopatra don’t live in a self-contained world of harmless metaphor and cannot lay claim to the self-defence of Donne’s lover in “The Canonization”:

> Alas, alas, who’s injured by my love?
> What merchants ships have may sighs drown’d? (10-11)

Love between Antony and Cleopatra is intense, passionate, addictive and powerful enough to revolt against Octavius, who is one of co-rulers and dominant military leader. The love sets the political conflict and tragic conclusion of the play and love is life’s greatest value that finally triumphs over death. Antony is addicted to love of Cleopatra which is as equally powerful and destructive, equally seductive and therefore equally desirable, deadly and ultimately equally tragic. Antony and Cleopatra’s relationship is a love affair between two intellectually and sexually equal beings; a satisfactory balance between two impressive personalities. Cleopatra is Antony’s equal and she does not have any shyness to take part on political conversation. Their love is fully influenced by the contemporary politics and totally victimized by political intrigue. We understand it fully when Antony says about his marriage with Octavia in these lines:

> I make this marriage for my peace,
> I’th’ East my pleasure lies. (2.3. 38-39)

Only for the political peace in Rome he gets married to Octavia, half-sister of Caesar, though he is in love with Cleopatra with whom he has his pleasure. Antony’s marriage with Octavia is a very big mistake and he does it only “to renegotiate his ostensible alliance with Octavius, the future Roman emperor. That changes the political game to a version of Russian roulette, in which Antony is bound to shoot – himself to get back to Cleopatra at much too high a cost” (Bloom: 555). By Enobarbus’s noticeable psychological understanding, the audience gets a deity like conception about these two lovers –

> She makes hungry (2.2.244-5)

As Edward Neill says: “Enobarbus frequently voices a cynical disillusionment which constantly strips away the hyperbolic rhetoric of love and material powers to expose in both the ungoverned play of mere appetite” (Neill 89-94).

Antony’s first wife Fulvia is alive when he falls in love with Cleopatra. He knows that Cleopatra was once the mistress of Julius Caesar and Cneius Pompey and yet he is passionately in love with Cleopatra when he gets married second time with Octavia. He is always trying to prove his love by his actions, showing how much he is willing to sacrifice for his beloved. Antony has got his main opportunity to prove his love in the battle of Actium where he gives up victory to follow his queen’s ship. There is no scope to doubt that they truly love each other. They are the greatest legendary lovers for all time. Both of them are
remarkable for their royal rank in the history. They veer in their moods with each other, their relationships with each other is gloriously magnificent. One moment they are slut and libertine, the next they are Empress and conqueror. This is of course a measure of their love – it is big enough, devious enough too, to encompass both extremes. Even more in act 4 and 5, Antony and Cleopatra come at this time to stand for the whole concept of love itself. They are the royal lovers in heaven and earth. We are the witness of their obsession with love and the total spectrum of what love is and is capable of. *Romeo and Juliet* may convince us of the bitter-sweetness of romantic young love and its inevitable affiliations with tragic or melodramatic circumstance. It is Antony and Cleopatra who teach us not only what mature romantic love is but how it can be blind, mean, spiteful, generous, sad, passive, active, sexual, lyrical, physical and mental and what love is for these two lovers. *Romeo and Juliet* is the tragedy of teenage love but *Antony and Cleopatra* is the tale of love as experienced by two adults. Even their embrace is bitter; they know their love is a challenge for them and they would have to pay for it. But they don’t give up their inner passion and freedom and are ready to pay for it. The character of Cleopatra is a masterpiece. She is a remarkable creation of Shakespeare, not like Juliet or Desdemona or Ophelia but an educated woman with knowledge of both Egyptian and Greek culture. The historical Cleopatra was well versed in mathematics, literature, astronomy and medicine and could speak several languages. In fact, she was the first Ptolemy who bothered to learn the Egyptian language. Her intelligence was assisted by her beauty, charisma and passion. These elements made her a powerful leader as well as a formidable foe. Dion Cassius followed Plutarch in description of Cleopatra’s attraction when he writes:

> For she was a woman of surpassing beauty and at time, when she was in the prime of youth, she was most striking; she also possessed a most charming voice, and knowledge of how to make herself agreeable to everyone. Being brilliant to look upon and to listen to, with the power to subjugate everyone, even a love-sated man already past his prime, she thought that it would be in keeping with her role to meet Caesar, and she reposed in her beauty all her claims to the throne. She asked therefore for admission to his presence, and on obtaining permission adorned and beautified herself so as to appear before him in the most majestic and at the same time pity-inspiring guise. When she had perfected her schemes she entered the city (for she had been living outside of it), and by night without Ptolemy's knowledge went into the palace.

(Roman History, Bk .XLII. Loeb, IV, 167-9).

The most powerful Roman soldier, Antony falls in love with her as Paris, the hero of Trojan War falls in love with Helen of Troy (*Iliad*). The most admirable trait of Antony is his capacity of love which is not just lust but a noble passion. If he is a great warrior, he is also a great lover. As A. C. Bradley says, “She is his heart’s desire made perfect. To love her is what he is born for”. We cannot reject their relationship merely as physical passion or sexual desire. If their relationship were no more than sexual longing, then the drama would lose its dignity and importance. Again if this relationship were regarded only as a sensual passion, then it would not be a great drama which undoubtedly it is. It is true that the Orthodox people would most certainly condemn their physical relationship outside marriage and their love is definitely shocking for them but the genuineness and the depth of their love cannot be denied. The relation of Antony and Cleopatra is thoroughly unconventional and their love is also mixed with pride and not free from
ambition. Moreover all the situations and circumstances are working against their love. But it is only their love that gradually extends its dominion into their life until they understand its sole value. “As Cleopatra understands (l.iii.1-10), a love that runs smoothly loses its forces, and the opposition she and Antony encounter works to keep their passion alive providing the relish ‘the cloyless sauce’ (ll.i.25) of their love” (Cantor 159). They understand only their love should keep them loyal to each other. According to them no value should be compared with their love and nothing can compensate for its lose. Finally, they stand together against the world with the strength of their love. We admit their love as illicit or adulterous at first but this relationship has been raised into the level of a noble and exalted passion and the drama will be transformed into a highly moving tragedy of love. “The many bawdy puns and sexual images of Antony and Cleopatra” as Traci says in The Love Play of Antony and Cleopatra “underscore the necessary earth and water that form a basis for the fire and air spiritual love in the play’s ladder of love” (163).

Many commentators, who admire Cleopatra's ultimate nobility, do not accept the reality of her earlier role as the exploiter of Antony's sexuality. But Shakespeare's Cleopatra is clearly representative of a familiar dramatic character type - the scheming courtesan. Both love and lust are characterized with basic contrast in the relationship of Antony and Cleopatra in this drama. It may make one feel confused and awestruck. In their death, Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra have conveyed the definitions of love and lust which made it clear that love and lust are more than just emotional impacts. Along with love lust comes, but with lust love always doesn’t come. These love and lust are rather very complex feelings and it can either improve or hinder any relation.

There is no scope to doubt that Cleopatra is deeply involved in love with Antony. Her highest quality, however, is her capacity for her self-sacrifice in the cause of love. Some critics doubt if Cleopatra really loves Antony. They think she is in love only with his position, his status, and his importance as a Triumvir, and as a military leader; she is really not emotionally involved in him. According to Stempel, Dowd and Bryant, it is lust, not love (Stempel 66; Dowd 278; Bryant 274).

Emerson classifies their relationship as “a sensual amour, but with no trust, no real sympathy, no depth of affection. Their ruin and death are due to their own guilty passion, and to causes wholly within themselves” (126). He continues, “Antony and Cleopatra shows only loves debased coin; the kiss of Antony is that of profligate, bestowed on one who receives it only with soiled lips and an empty heart. Antony gives himself to Cleopatra’s charm; Cleopatra captivates Antony as her own sensual pleasure and less distinctly, for her own love of power.” (126). George Bernard Shaw observes that “Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra must needs be as intolerable to the true Puritan as it is vaguely distressing to the ordinary healthy citizen”. “Besides”, he adds “I have a technical objection to make sexual infatuation a tragic theme, experience proves that it is only effective in the comic spirit” (28).

Cleopatra is certainly a wily woman and Antony himself says that she is ‘cunning past man’s thought’. Her beauty is enrapturing, and she has in abundance the intoxicating sexuality essential to the successful courtesan; as Enobarbus puts it, ‘vilest things become themselves in her’ (2.2.238-239). She also has genuine affection for Antony, but even as she reveals her fondness for him in his absence, she discloses her past history as a courtesan.
I was

A morsel for a monarch. And grate Pompey
Would stand and make his eyes in my brow;
There would be anchor his aspect, and die
With looking on his life.  (1.5.31-35)

Her distressed and anger at the news of Antony's marriage to Octavia are certainly genuine but when she learns of Octavia's unattractive physical features her spirits are restored, like a courtesan her confidence in sexual allure assures herself that she will win her lover back. And the fact remains that she loves Antony as she did never love any man before in her life. Throughout Acts 1 to 4 Cleopatra displays the powerful charms of an experienced and thoroughly professional courtesan. She attempts to control her lover with a strategy of alternate taunts and insults and seductive sexuality. Then in Act 5, after Antony is dead, Cleopatra acknowledges the depth of her true feelings for her lover and dedicates her suicide to their joint love. She thereby transcends her earlier nature through the power of passion. She becomes humble not before the gods and fortune but before her love for Antony. She realizes that life without Antony is meaningless. The loss neither of herself or not her kingdom but of Antony sticks her fully first time.

Antony and Cleopatra are united in death in a more perfect relationship than they have on earth. Death projects the final expression of their passion. Passion is transformed into the finest part of their pure love in the world and in the repeated theme of love-in-death and death-in-love. Their love is so spacious that the mortal world is not enough and an image of a future life is arisen in their death when Antony moves towards Cleopatra and says:

I come, my queen  / . Stay for me.

Where souls do couch on flowers, we’ll hand in hand  (4.14. 50-54)

Cleopatra’s integrity and the intensity of her love for Antony give her right to the words: “Husband, I come!” She completes her transformation into fulfilment of immortal longings and says:

Fire, and air; my other elements
give to baser life.  (5.2.288-289)

When she abandons her actual earthly relationship with Antony for an eternal union, Cleopatra transcends the mortal world and transforms herself into “a most triumphant lady.”

As generations pass, the image of Cleopatra transforms to suit the taste of the particular artist and time period. Cleopatra can be intelligent, authoritative, seductive, manipulative, strong or weak, but always her sexuality is a prominent characteristic which all artists deal with one way or the other. Despite the dynamism of Cleopatra's image, no matter how we unravel her one aspect of Cleopatra holds a strand of her identity together, her sexuality.

Antony and Cleopatra is less a tragedy than a victorious vision, a fulfilment of immortal longings; desire is sharp and pure and Cleopatra is the ‘most triumphant lady’. The union of their minds, the mutual planetary pull of their thoughts, is shown in the echoing motifs of a Sati in Cleopatra. It is not impossible that Shakespeare was aware of this particular Indian practice. As Banerjee says, according to many narrators ‘Sati’ occurred during the ‘transitional period of 1500-1723’ and these larger troops of narrators
were the European travellers. (Banerjee 82). Regarding to this reference, Indian practice of Sati was well known in the European society. So, the concept of a faithful, overwhelmed widow should be cross cultural phenomenon which was also common in patriarchal society. In Marlowe’s ‘The Tragedy of Dido, Queen of Carthage’ there is the description of Dido’s death on the pyre of Aeneas’s memory and Antony recalls the story of Dido and Aeneas when he plans to die (4.14.53). Cleopatra also knows only in her death she can be be reunited with Antony:

I am again for Cydnus
To meet Mark Antony. (5.2.227- 28)

‘Sati’ is a sad old Indian social culture. It was tribal custom of sacrificing a woman for the benefit and the gratification of a dead man that is nothing but a manifestation of power of man over the woman. The burning of widows in India did not seem only a local custom as it might appear. It was also practiced in Slavonic countries, Scandinavia, Greece, Egypt, China, etc. (Tawany 255-272). The taint of that brutal origin still exists in rural Indian society. The naked dominance of some high sounding ideals like love, devotion and duty make it more respectable. And the custom of sacrificing woman in any part of the world is nothing but a manifestation of the brutality of manmade society. We may recall of Chastity belt that men invented for their wives to wear when they went on long journeys. But for the longest journey – the journey to the eternity from where there is no return – they decided to take their wives with them so that they could rest in peace after live.

As Banerjee cited, from the 16th century European travellers’ description, ‘Sati’ was a practice that was judged as barbarous but also greatly admired as heroic proof of wifely virtue. In Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare didn’t leave any alternative for Cleopatra but to commit suicide. She was a sovereign ruler and the humiliation of defeat in war was unacceptable to her. Due to her Egyptian nationality and sexual awareness, Queen Cleopatra is forever set apart from Rome. Throughout the history, she is categorized as a harlot queen, a whore, and a cunning woman by dozens of authors and filmmakers. This tradition was followed by Plutarch, Shakespeare, Dryden, and Fielding. Cleopatra desired the title of “Antony's wife” and that is a rare positive portrayal made of her also by Sarah Fielding in “The Lives of Cleopatra and Octavia”. Cleopatra could not become Antony's lawful wife in Roman terms in spite of her power, her exotic beauty and her sexual awareness because of her foreign origin and Egyptian characteristics. Only after the death of Antony Cleopatra rejects her political titles and proclaims herself no more than a woman and commanded, “By such poor passion as the maid that milks” (3.14.74-75).

Cleopatra shares a common bond with all women in grief. As Loomba says, “It appears that Cleopatra is tamed. The wanton gypsy becomes Antony's wife; the queen is stripped to an essential femininity that attaches to all women irrespective of class” (Loomba 128). In Shakespeare's play, by embracing her womanhood as well as Roman practices, Cleopatra finally is able to achieve the status of Antony's Roman wife, living up to Roman ideals. Only then she renounces the queen Cleopatra and wishes to bury Antony:

We'll bury him; and then, what's brave, what's noble,
Let's do't after the high Roman fashion,
And make death proud to take us. (3.14.87-88).
By following this tradition, Cleopatra hopes that she will live up in Roman standards and be accepted as a suitable wife for Antony that should be continued after her death that, “death proud to take us”. And the audience is the witness of her becoming Antony’s wife when Caesar says,

She shall be buried by her Antony.
No grave in the earth shall clip in it
A pair so famous. (5.2.357-359).

Logic and human fantasy vary and certainly an artist’s fancy is not and cannot be equal in concept and understanding of verdict of a judge from a court of law. With her death Queen Cleopatra has established her relation with Sati, the “Sati” that lives and dies together with her husband.

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[Note: For a discussion of treatment of social issues in the Mahābhārata]

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Fulderink, Monika. “Suttee Revisited: From the Iconography of Martyrdom to the Burkean Sublime” New Literary History 30/2 (1999). 413 ‘Various spelling of this term occurs in the literature, the two most common being ‘Sati’ and “suttee”. Unusually sati refers to the woman who becomes ‘sati’ or who performs the act, while ‘Suttee’ refers to ‘the ceremony of immolation’


Marshal, Cynthia. “Man of Steel Done Got the Blues: Melancholic Subversion of Presence in Antony and Cleopatra” Shakespeare Quarterly 44. 1993.


Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* is the most complex and profound portrayal of tragic love. Most critics assert that Cleopatra dies in a Roman fashion, appointing herself to the role of a wife to a Roman Emperor. However, some Eastern elements invade her death scene that makes it difficult to see her death purely as a Roman suicide. My paper compares the nature of Cleopatra’s death with that of *Sati*, the Indian Hindu custom of “voluntary death of a widow.” The custom of Sati was not completely unknown to early modern Europe. For example, Francisco Pelsaert (1595-1630), a Dutch Merchant, writes that “Sati goes and bathes, according to the daily custom, puts on her finest clothes, her jewels, and the best ornaments she has, adorning herself as if it was her wedding day.” The same symbolic gesture of *Sati* is revealed in the rituals of Cleopatra’s self sacrifice. Cleopatra dramatizes her own death as a ceremonial preparation of a royal marriage. She wears her best attire and puts on her crown to meet Antony. Cleopatra’s death is the prelude to new pleasures of ‘immortal longings.’ Her declaration, “I am fire and air; my baser elements / I give to baser life,” might not sound strange if it came from a ‘faithful wife’ who ‘becomes Sati’ through self immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband. The drama ends in death but anticipates union of the lovers in the Elysian Fields just as a faithful Indian wife was supposed to be united with her husband as she threw herself on his funeral pyre.

(261 words)