

Mourning the Mother: Death and Feminine Authority in Odia Commemorations of Queen Victoria

PRITIPUSPA MISHRA 
University of Southampton, United Kingdom

ON the death of Queen Victoria in January 1901, Madhusudan Rao (1853–1912), one of the more influential literary figures in Odisha, published a commemorative pamphlet in Odia titled *Mahadevi Victoria* (“Goddess Victoria”). Early in the poem, Rao invoked the power of the mother with the following passage:

The majesty of mother’s name is spread across the globe
There is peace and prosperity under the sun in her name
The sweetness of mother’s name imbues the human life force
She whose life reveals itself as the living, dazzling polestar
That great lady Mother Victoria has departed from this world¹

This invocation of the departed queen as mother situated Rao’s act of mourning within his own local Odia context. Central to the passage above is not a description of the queen but an account of the centrality of the figure of the mother to his (and his Odia readers’) sense of self and placement in the world. It is through the notion of the loss of the mother that Rao seeks to localize the death of the distant but powerful queen. And yet the mother here is not simply local. The mother invoked here is a universal figure who impacts the life of her children in a universal way, whether she be Odia, Indian, or from faraway lands. By invoking such a universal experience of being mothered, Rao is able to situate his community of Odia readers within a broader community of global British imperial subjects who were simultaneously mourning the passing of their queen/mother.²

Reading this act of mourning allows us an opportunity to explore how mourning or lament functioned in early twentieth-century Odia

Pritipuspa Mishra is an associate professor in the Department of History at the University of Southampton. Her book *Language and the Making of Modern India: Nationalism and the Vernacular in Colonial Odisha, 1803–1956* (2020) was published by Cambridge University Press. She has also published an edited volume titled *Language, Nations and Multilingualism: Questioning the Herderian Ideal* (Routledge, 2021). Her previous work has been published in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, *Contemporary South Asia*, and *Parallax*.

Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 171–190.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

doi:10.1017/S1060150323000785

literature as a means to reveal contemporary problems within the community. Lamentations about the status of the Odia mother abounded in this period and served as sites for Odia nationalist critiques of the social, cultural, and economic degradation of the Odia subject of the British Empire. The queen's death is made vernacular here by situating her within this literary-political context of critique through the use of the genre of *bilapa* or lament literature. In what follows, I will explore how the use of familiar tropes of lament and feminine authority allowed the Odia poet Madhusudan Rao to both localize the death of the queen and maintain a fragile balance between the specific, provincial claims of the Odia subjects and more global demands of imperial and national citizenship. I begin with an exploration of lament in mourning in the West, and its specific traditions in India and Odisha, to situate the broad structures of critique and memory it enables. This will be followed by a brief account of new Odia monarchism that formed the context for Rao's representation of the queen. Set against this context, this article will explore Rao's use of the Odia modes of lament poetry to mourn the loss of two mothers—the recently deceased Queen Victoria and the colonized, underdeveloped motherland, Utkal Mata.

1. WHAT REMAINS? LAMENT AND CRITIQUE IN MOURNING

In the introduction to their book *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, David Eng and David Kazanjian pose a provocative question. Rather than focusing on what is lost in loss and mourning, they ask, "What remains?"³ Building upon Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Eng and Kazanjian discuss two models of mourning. The first, Benjamin calls *acedia*—a historicist impulse to grasp upon what is lost and maintain its memory in fixity.⁴ Mourning of this kind can only focus on that which is lost and cannot be recovered. It is a regressive and unchanging position. Such mourning can only be escaped by working through the trauma or loss—by reliving or retelling that which has been lost and getting past the loss.

On the contrary, Eng and Kazanjian suggest that there could be another form of mourning: one that shifts the focus from what is lost to what remains after the loss. In this form of mourning, they suggest, "the attention to remains generates a politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary."⁵ By focusing on those who remain and how they engage

with that which has been lost, we can explore discourses and practices of mourning and melancholia that allow us to see mourning as a productive creative process.

Eng and Kazanjian draw our attention to an active form of mourning that is at work in Sigmund Freud's definition of melancholia.⁶ However, Freud sees melancholia as an unhealthy sort of mourning, because the ego loses a part of itself to that which has been lost. Thus, held hostage by this grief, there is no possibility to move past this grief. In contrast, in his writing about friendship and death, Jacques Derrida addresses this immersive mourning as an act of responsibility toward the other.⁷ According to this view, mourning is an act of friendship that allows one to sustain a connection with the other beyond death. The other therefore lives on in the self beyond death.

This understanding of mourning as something that carries within it and makes possible other discourses echoes Indian traditions of mourning and lament. In his work on literary traditions of lament in Sanskrit literature, Stephen P. Hopkins describes how lament enables a particular kind of grief and affect to be expressed. Literary lament, particularly feminine literary lament, domesticates wild and uncontrollable emotion into something thinkable by using "highly formal aesthetic frameworks that express systematic and sober attentiveness to pain, emotion experienced with and within acts of language."⁸ Hopkins argues that this coupling of formal aesthetic frameworks and the excessive emotions in literary laments "troubles the traditional binaries of 'raw' emotion and 'secondary' reflection."⁹ Therefore, the lament's focus on emotion does not preclude a reflection on the pain and emotion that are experienced. The use of formal aesthetic modes of description allows us access to a more painstaking analysis of pain and trauma. This enables lamentation to carry freight beyond emotion. Hopkins suggests that literary representations of feminine lament allow for ethical appraisals of that which is being mourned. In other words, apart from expressing grief, these texts also performed political and analytical functions of critique and self-creation.

This "work of tears," Hopkins suggests, has some features that recur in literatures of lament. First, Sanskrit traditions of lament often invoke a tantric experience of time where the time of togetherness remembered from (and in) the past is juxtaposed with the present time of mourning. The past, therefore, is made present in laments about the subject's separation from their beloved. Second, Hopkins borrows Gail Holst-Warhaft's phrasing on memorialization in laments to argue that

it often features a hectic listing of attributes that “inscribe, imprint, engrave and impress’ the dead or lost love onto the social body, weaving and spinning songs . . . calling for action, for revenge, for social justice; they perform what is impossible to speak in any other way.”¹⁰ Laments, therefore, can provide a socially acceptable normative space for feminine critique and dissent that have no other avenue in prevalent social norms and conditions. Hopkins discusses Sita’s lament in the epic Ramayana where Sita rails against her abductor, Ravana, and laments her separation from her husband, Rama. In Sita’s lament, we find a critique of her abductor as well as a nuanced and critical reading of her relationship with her husband. In this lament, Sita is able to hold multiple critical positions without creating a moral equivalence between her abductor and her husband. Finally, this third feature of the genre according to Hopkins is that this critique could be expressed as a wish or a curse which invoked a higher power. Critique of this kind sought to effect change as much as it sought to mark loss and grief. Therefore, from Hopkins’s treatment of early texts of lament in India we glean a tradition of mourning that could do more than inscribe loss within the social landscape. This kind of speech could be radical and change seeking.

These early traditions of mourning do suggest that the lamentation in India was formulaic as well as functional. We find similar trends in performative feminine mourning in modern India. Parita Mukta has explored the subversive politics of feminine mourning in colonial Gujarat that occasioned an upper-caste, middle-class social reform program of suppression of public ritual lamentation by women during funerals.¹¹ Mukta charts the traditions of public female lament in Gujarat where in the precolonial period such practices were nurtured by the male establishment. Whereas the male priesthood officiated over the rituals of funerals, women led the performance of lamentation at funerals: a gendered division of labor. Even in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Gujarat, these performances weren’t simply public and social expressions of grief. Drawing on literary and ethnographic sources of the period, Mukta argues that laments “provided the space for the voicing of harsh social truths” in the same vein as Hopkins suggests ancient literary lament performed subversive ethical critiques.¹²

In colonial Odisha we find that several genres of laments circulated in the public sphere. Genres like *Kanda* (“songs of wailing”), *Bilapa* (“songs of lament”), *Biraha* (“songs of parting and separation”), *Kheda* (“songs of melancholy”), and *Shoka* (“songs of grief”) performed specific functions as social texts. While *Bilapa*, *Kheda*, or *Shoka* were often

deployed in a moment of grief to address the passing of a loved one, *Biraha* addressed the grief of separation in romantic love, and *Kanda* was most often deployed in the songs sung by and for young women as they left for their marital homes. We see a constellation of these literary approaches to lamentation in a 1904 text entitled *Brajabandhu Biraha* (“Lamentations for Brajabandhu”).¹³ This collection of religious songs about Krishna’s perilous visit to his murderous uncle Kansa was written by Manichandra Mahapatra (1856–1920), an important official in the educational department. The publisher’s preface suggests that the songs were explicitly written as a means to combine traditional musical scores and poetic genres with a more modern take on love, piety, affection, and heroism. The collection features most lament genres, such as *Gopikara Kheda* (“Melancholy of the Gopis”), *Jasodhankara Bilapa* (“Lament of Jasodhara”), *Radhikara Shoka* (“Radhika’s Grief”) and *Brajanganamananka Biraha* (“Lament of the Braja Women”). The fact that this text is written by an important official in the education department is worthy of note here. The text is written in a moment when the Odia literati working in education and publishing are engaged in a strong push toward reforming Odia literature for modern purposes. Mahapatra’s choice of genre suggests that these genres of lament were seen as genres that could carry the load of modern aesthetic, educational, and political practices.¹⁴

For our purposes here, it may be useful to understand what work such texts could do. Among the most prevalent forms of these laments were the *Kandas*, which were often sung as girls were sent off to their marital home. We find several *Kandas* published in the form of cheap, affordable booklets for circulation in the Odia-speaking areas.¹⁵ As these texts served as the basis for specific social rituals during wedding ceremonies, it is hard to date specific poems. Many of the extant copies of these songs are reprints of undated originals.¹⁶ One such text is *Jemadei Kanda* (“Jemadei Weeps”), where two songs are presented. A close look at these songs and other extant texts suggests that these laments were built around some formulaic elements. In one song, we find a conversation—an inconsolable reproach from the daughter Jema to her family. Repeatedly she asks why she is to be sent away, and why there is such a disjunction between her loving upbringing and this ruthless separation. However, there is more than separation at stake in her reproach. What she is bewailing is also an anxiety about the shift between a carefree childhood and the possibility of an adulthood laden with responsibilities. In

her reproach to her parents, she compares her unknown marital home to a river and an ocean that threaten to subsume her.

The song narrates this exchange:

Jema said, "Mother, you have nurtured me so long
 And yet you knowingly push me into to the river"
 . . .
 "Father, you gave birth to me and raised me
 And yet now you seek to plunge me in the ocean."¹⁷

The reproach continues in this vein as Jema addresses each member of her family. In this formulaic repetition of address, her family comes into being. It is discursively produced at this crucial social moment as she recalls each member and addresses her grief to each one of them. In so doing, she discursively establishes her relationship with each one of the family members. She memorializes the wide range of relationships she has grown up with—patiently listing out the significant as well as the insignificant ones. And at the precise moment of the departure, she comes to see herself as embedded in a web of relationships. This memorialization is necessary in the sense that she is now embarking upon a journey to create a new set of relationships in her marital home. Her ability to recall and reiterate her relationship with each and every member of her parental home anticipates her ability to create a similar set of affectionate relationships in her marital home. This transition to feminine adulthood entails the hard work of re-creating relationships,¹⁸ as the family members seek to reassure her that she is loved and will be remembered. While these connections to home are reiterated, what is also being narrated in the consolation is the complex position of the daughters of the household. The name Jema translates as the daughter of the king. As the relatives repeatedly address her with the honorific Jema, this exchange between her and her relatives takes on more nuanced meaning. She is framed here as the *jema* or princess of the house. However, also articulated here is the hope that she will go on to be the *jema* of her marital home.

While the song is hopeful this way, it also elaborates on the familial anxieties and uncertainties about Jema's future. For instance, the family console Jema by invoking the divine:

Father responds to Jema, "listen, my dear daughter,
 This is how God has deemed the world to be"
 . . .
 Aunt says, "Such was your Karma,
 But just as days turn, you will also return"¹⁹

These responses suggest a sense of helplessness and powerlessness on the part of the daughter as well as her family. Rather, higher powers like God and Karma or Jema's in-laws dictate what is to happen.

The repetition of Jema's reproach as she picks on each family member is mirrored in many of the *Kandas* published in this period. This formulaic repetition seems to elongate this moment of separation and to temporarily suspend the separation. Jema and her family are made to pause in the moment of separation—inhabit this moment of grief till she is made to leave. The song offers no end or resolution to Jema's grief. This discourse on grief abruptly ends with her departure. In the conventional Freudian sense, this song is about melancholy rather than mourning. It does not help her or her family to work through and transcend the grief of separation. What, then, is the work of this text?

In this format of lament as *Kanda*, we find that this formulaic repetition and abrupt ending hold mourning open. As Stephen Hopkins suggests, by holding the past and the present together through a narrative about the disjunction between her loving upbringing and her present separation, Jema leaves mourning open-ended and unresolved.²⁰ And, by keeping this mourning open, the songs are able to present an unspeakable critique of the cultural norms that determine women's lives in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Odisha.

By repetition and open-ended mourning they are also able to maintain the connection between Jema and her family, despite her imminent departure. The repetition and naming of each member of the family establishes Jema's connection with them even as this connection is to be sundered, thus psychically undoing the separation that she is remonstrating against.

Siddharth Satpathy has elaborated a broader tradition of what he calls "familial literary forms" that circulated in Odisha in this period. These forms included *Rajadoli* ("songs sung by girls during the festival of raja"), *Suadakhia* ("songs sung in the occasion of feasts given to pregnant women"), *Nua Bou Bandana* (songs sung to welcome new brides to their marital home), and *Bohu Nananda Samabada* ("songs about exchanges between the bride and her sister-in-law"). Satpathy argues that these forms seek to reiterate family belonging and all the complexities that come with the position of being a bride that belongs with her natal and marital home.²¹ These kinds of texts enabled the articulation of the making and remaking of familial relations.

As we can see, much like the ancient laments discussed by Hopkins, Odia laments of this period are texts that seek to do "work" and to

expound on moral and ethical issues. Because of the ability of these kinds of texts to perform labors beyond that of expressing grief, these genres of lament came to be used for more explicitly political and modern purposes.²² Our reading of Madhusudan Rao's laments on the death of the queen needs to be situated within this literary context, where the form of literary lament is borrowed from existing textual and aural traditions of mourning to express palimpsestic narratives of loss and belonging with the region, nation, and empire. Just as Jema discursively produces her parental family through the mode of lamentation or *Kanda*, Madhusudan produces his version of the British Empire by lamenting for the departed queen.

2. MONARCHISM: THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF LAMENTING THE QUEEN

Monarchism acquired a new value for the educated intelligentsia in early twentieth-century Odisha. While regional politics in Odisha was dominated by concerns about the minority status of Odia-speaking people in various British Indian provinces, the political landscape of the Odia-speaking area was also marked by the presence of multiple monarchs. That is, the administration and governance of Odisha in the early twentieth century were divided between British India and indirect rule under the princely states. The rise in linguistic regional politics in Odisha during this period drew major Odia monarchs of the princely states into the regional political arena where they shared a common platform with the emergent Odia intelligentsia. In this context, native monarchs came to be the leaders of early Odia regionalism. This resulted in alliances, collaborations, and friendships that produced a new monarchism in colonial Odisha, where monarchs were familiar figures rather than distant sovereigns. Madhusudan's lament for Queen Victoria is framed within this context of affectionate monarchism and could be read as a vicarious articulation of affection for princely monarchs.

A brief account of the political context of Odisha in this period would be useful here. Madhusudan wrote about *Utkal Mata* and *Mother Victoria* at a momentous time of change in Odia regional politics. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, community associations were on the rise in the urban centers of the Odisha division of the Bengal Presidency. These associations sought to cohere around the social, cultural, and economic interests of the Odia-speaking community and represent them to the colonial government.²³

The need for this representation arose from the curiously fractured political geography of the Odia-speaking peoples. Most of the areas where a majority of the population spoke the Odia language were annexed into the British Empire in a piecemeal manner over a long period of time. For instance, while parts of the Orissa Division of the Bengal Presidency came under British control in 1765 when the East India Company took over the Diwani of Bengal, the final few sections of Odia-speaking areas were annexed during the Second Anglo-Maratha Wars in 1803. Due to this process, the Odia-speaking areas were scattered in a number of British provinces, and the Odia-speaking people were rendered minorities in these larger provinces. This gave rise to a movement for the unification of the Odia-speaking areas under a single administration, which caught steam over the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Apart from this geographical conundrum, the issue of the endangered status of the Odia language galvanized the Odia-speaking elite over the second half of the nineteenth century. In the 1860s, the education department of the Orissa division explored the possibility of replacing Odia with Bengali, as it was seen as a much more modern language with a well-developed publishing and textbook industry that could support the growing needs of the education department in Odisha. In opposition to this proposal, the urban Odia-speaking elite footed a decades long movement for the development of the language through an increased literary production and school textbook writing. Recent scholarship has shown that this period in Odia regional politics saw the rise of a new kind of Odia readership through literary and linguistic activism in the last decade of the nineteenth century.²⁴

At the turn of the twentieth century, these two trends, geographical and linguistic, came together in the formation of a pan-Odia political organization: Utkal Sammilani (“Utkal Union Conference”). In December 1903, the Sammilani met for the first time and declared that their central aims were the social, economic, and cultural upliftment of the Odia-speaking population of British India. In the inaugural presidential address delivered by the raja of Mayurbhanj, Ramachandra Bhanjadeo, we find a painstaking and consistent argument against seeing this new association as a political organization. At the core of this insistence on an apolitical stand was an understanding that the nascent Odia political sphere needed to consider its national and imperial political context while carving out a space in which to effectively demand the separate state of Odisha. In terms of imperial politics at the local level,

the local colonial administration had been explicit in its disapproval of any political activism. At the national level, the Congress's reluctance to take on the demand for regional linguistic reorganization as part of their agenda meant that the Utkal Sammilani could not look to them for support. This situation meant that the politics of the making of Odisha had to carve a space for itself while balancing the restrictive rigors of imperial rule, and the need to maintain national allegiances, while recognizing that the agendas of the association did not tally with that of the Indian National Congress.

In the absence of support from the colonial state and the Indian National Congress, the rulers of the princely states contributed to the moral authority of the movement for a separate state of Utkal or Odisha. As noted earlier, the president of the first session of the Utkal Union Conference was the raja of Mayurbhanj, Ramachandra Bhanjadeso. More than half of the founding members of the conference were native princes. In addition to supporting the movement for the formation of a separate province of Odisha, native princes played a crucial part in the development of the Odia public sphere. For instance, one of the most influential newspapers in nineteenth-century Odisha, *Sambalpara Hiteisini*, was published under the patronage of Raja Sudhaldev of Bamanda. This reliance on the princely state rulers was further bolstered by the prevailing Odia understanding of political sovereignty in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Due to their sustained presence in the Odia public sphere, the native princes served as a foundation for the Odia understanding of monarchy and the monarch's relationship with the Odia citizen-subject.²⁵ We find this affection for the native monarchs in Madhusudan Rao's poetry, as he wrote a number of eulogies of major native princes of Odisha. In these eulogies we find narratives of affect for benevolent, parental monarchs who nurtured the interests of their Odia subjects. Madhusudan's lament upon the queen's death is informed by this view of monarchy.

3. ON FEMININE AUTHORITY AND LAMENT: MADHUSUDAN'S TWO MOTHERS

By the turn of the century, Rao was a well-known educational and literary figure in the urban Odia-speaking areas. Born to immigrant Marathi parents in 1853, Rao spent much of his childhood in coastal Odisha.²⁶ His early education coincided with the development of the colonial state-run education system in Odisha. As a result of this he was able to progress from Bengali medium schooling in the Puri district to more advanced

studies at the Cuttack High School, which would later become the iconic Ravenshaw Collegiate School. During his later education and his career as a teacher and headmaster in various schools in Cuttack, Puri, and Balasore, Madhusudan came to cultivate his two abiding intellectual pursuits that would engage him till his death in 1912: educational reform in Odisha and the creation of Odia literature for the modern age.

In his educational work, Rao served both within the governmental circles as well as in his capacity as a private citizen. He supplemented his work as the deputy inspector of schools with efforts to establish and support new institutions such as the Cuttack Town School and wrote some of the first school textbooks on literature in Odia. This textbook writing was part of Rao's Odia cultural activism, as he was responding to the prevailing need to populate school shelves with viable and appropriately modern reading material for school-aged children. *Kabitabali* ("String of Poems"), a collection of poems published in two parts in 1876 and 1884, served as a popular literary school textbook in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Odia schools.

Rao's literary career spanned from 1876 to 1911 and mirrored the rise of regional nationalism in Odisha. Just as the textbook work was part of his cultural activism to support Odia language instruction in the schools of the Odia-speaking areas, his writing over these years reflected his engagement with the growing demand for the separate Odia-speaking province. Even as he did not exclusively write about the question of Odia nationalism, Rao's writing in this period introduces us to some of the key figures of the movement through his eulogistic poetry. For instance, in his collection *Basanta Gatha* ("Tales from Spring"), published in 1902, Rao writes sonnets to friends and colleagues such as Radhanath Ray, Fakirmohan Senapati, and the departed Pyarimohan Acharjya. In other poems like "Sri Panchami" and "Ekamra Kanan," Rao addresses the social and political challenges faced by Odia-speaking people. By the end of his career, Rao, along with Radhanath Ray and Phakirmohan Senapati, had come to be known as one of the three most important literary figures of his time.

Even as Odia nationalism dominated much of his poetic work, Rao's Brahmo faith was threaded through his writing on regionalism, friendship, emotion, and nature. Discussing Rao's translation of William Cowper's "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk" in *Nirbasitara Bilapa* ("The Exile's Lament"), Ashok K. Mahapatra describes how Rao's Brahmo faith informed his understanding of human action and divinity.²⁷ Mahapatra argues that the choice of Cowper's poem is driven by

Rao's attraction for the notion of rational theism enshrined in the original. The wildness of the castaway's island retreat is wild precisely due to the absence of man's rational imprint on it. It is the puritanical combination of Selkirk's rationalism and his openness to a rational God's mercy that draws Rao's attention. Mahapatra suggests that Rao introduces a new dimension to his translation of the Christian original by drawing on his Brahma belief that "the human being is the manifestation of Brahma."²⁸ In our ensuing discussion of his Odia nationalist poetry, we will find how this equation of human with God, and action with divinity, serves as the foundational language of his discussion of nationalist action.

Within this framework of nationalist action in Rao's poetry, feminine authority plays a particularly important affective role. In a number of his poems, Rao repeatedly circles back to *Bharati* or the Goddess Saraswati as the arbiter of Odia and Indian development and refinement.

For instance, in his poem "Bharati Bandana" ("Supplication to Goddess Bharati") (1883), Rao pleads with the goddess to intervene in an increasingly retrograde and enervated India.

The country is dark without you O Mother,
Like a monstrous funeral ground,
All the sons of Bharata are dead
They have no hope, no desire to work
...
Oh Mother Bharati, be kind, come
Play your harp that defeats death
That gives life, like nectar,
Let this country awaken into life.²⁹

Again, in his eulogy of Radhanath Ray entitled "Radhanath Biyoge" ("In Mourning for Radhanath"), Rao addresses the goddess as the mother of all poets and thanks her for the blessing of having Radhanath Ray grace Odisha in his generation. This gratitude is both collective and personal. Rao writes, "For the people, Radhanath was only a poet, but for me, Devi, you know who he was."³⁰

When we put these two instances together, we find that two faces of the mother emerge here. While we find the life-giving power of the goddess in "Bharati Bandana," we are also introduced to a more mundane mother who sees the heart of the child in "Radhanath Biyoge." Both of these positions are powerful and exercise authority over the subject. The depth of this authority is particularly evident when we look at how death is addressed in the first poem. When he says that the "sons of Bharata are dead," Rao is referencing a specific kind of death that is

not absolute; the intervention of the mother goddess can return the sons of Bharath to life, to work. This impermanent death also illuminates for us Rao's understanding of life within the context of national and regional citizenship. Life here is equated with work, action, and an openness to change. Rao's lamentations about the dying Utkal Mata and the departed Empress Victoria are informed by this notion of the feminine authority of the figure of the goddess and her ability to bestow life.

4. LAMENTING UTKAL MATA

On the occasion of the formation of the Utkal Sammilani, Rao published a collection of poems called *Utkal Gatha* ("The Saga of Utkal") in 1903. One of the poems, "Utkal Janani Prati" ("To Utkal Mata"), explicitly references Odisha as Utkal Mata. Of interest to us here is how Rao used lamentation as a narrative form to lay out an Odia nationalist critique of the prevailing conditions of the Odia-speaking areas in this poem. While framed as an address to Utkal Mata, this poem is a lament to a declining and enervated motherland.

The poem begins with a description of a listless mother who holds in her lap a million people, but in his travels across this vast motherland, the poet encounters "not a single person."³¹ This emptiness is not an absence of bodies but that of minds. Rao describes the Odias that do linger in the following terms.

All like me, just illiterate fools,
 Stuck in their petty interests like lifeless effigies.
 They all worship petty gods of wealth
 And no one seeks to revere the great divine.
 Some hold on to their rotting riches,
 And slumber in their beds of indolent pleasure.
 In their bloated pride many intellectuals
 Unthinkingly swallow worn-out obsolete knowledge.
 In the field of ethics and war you find useless babbling,
 Amongst cunning and deceitful people. (*Utkal Gatha* 1948, 8)

This account of the motherland rife with regressive indolence draws as much from Rao's contemporary views on the economic, social, and cultural backwardness of the Odia-speaking area as it does on his own Brahmo understanding of a pious and productive life. The deadness of the Odia is similar to the listlessness of India in "Bharati Bandana." According to Rao, what is missing here are people who would act in the interest of the motherland.

Where is the wisdom that can free us from the coils of desire,
 Where are the brave children who should adorn your lap?
 No life, no motion, just arid desert,
 Reflect! Tell us why we are in such a wretched condition. (8)

The poem ends with a suggestion for change:

Hear, Mother, Hear,
 The whole world's sweet invitation.
 "Odia! Odia!"—abandon for a moment this narrow demand,
 May your children enter the global assembly.
 By joining the vast heart of humanity
 May all sing, "Hail truth, Hail,"
 May all espouse the enlightened life of truth,
 Then the dark night will promptly flee.
 . . .
 Enthralled in the joy of hope, your children
 Will become Dharma veera and Karma veera.
 With the blessing of the almighty, like Laxmi,
 You, Utkal Bhumi, will be the mother of warriors and a sati. (9)

While this exhortation is aimed at the Utkal Mata, the resolution of the crisis lies in the hands of the Odia people. In the tradition of Odia laments that do more than just grieve, even as what is being lamented here is the abjection of the motherland, we also find a presence of a dual critique. As the poem is addressed to Utkal Mata and she is being exhorted to listen and reflect, we can assume that the lamentation is also a critique of the mother herself. There is something missing in the mother who has allowed her children to become so lifeless. Ultimately, in the framing of mother as nurturer, this degeneration of her children would be the mother's responsibility.

And yet, when we look at the poem closely, we find that Utkal Mata is an idea, and she is constituted by the Odia people. In this way, this particular iteration of Utkal Mata moves beyond the usual geographical descriptions of motherland that we find in Odia literature of the early twentieth century.³² By focusing on the constitutive nature of the Odia motherland, the critique here is aimed at the Odia people. If what is desired is a robust idea of the Odia nation as a "mother of warriors and a sati," then the Odia people need to escape their narrow provincialism and move beyond obsolete ways of life to embrace global progress.

5. LAMENTING MOTHER VICTORIA

It is within this context of rising regional nationalism that Madhusudan Rao wrote his lament on the death of Queen Victoria in his poem “Mahadevi Victoria,” published in late 1901. In what follows, I will explore the ways in which Rao frames the loss of the queen in his lament within a language of motherhood and feminine authority that echo his other writing on women and goddesses. Consisting of seventeen stanzas, the poem can be divided into three thematic sections—a description of Victoria as empress and of her global might; an account of her impact on her Odia praja (subjects);³³ and finally, a sketch of her life as a virtuous wife and mother. This narrative arc, which begins with a globally influential empress and ends with a virtuous wife and mother or sati, effectively locates Victoria within Odia frames of reference. Conversely, this treatment of the queen locates the Odia people in a global empire. If lament also helps to discursively form a family as we saw in *Jemadei Kanda*, then lament for Victoria helps Rao imagine an imperial family at the head of which is Mother Victoria. And this discursive imagination is presented precisely at the time when the mother has embarked on her final journey. Unlike *Jemadei*, the lament is articulated not by the departing soul but by the children left behind.

“Mahdevi Victoria” begins with an atmospheric description of how the death of the empress has pitched the world into darkness:

The shadow of sorrow on the death of the great one
Has suddenly spread its vast wings
Shrouding the entire earth.
Such awful regret!
The breath of the devi is now extinguished. (1)

Thereafter, emphasizing the scale of the tragedy, Rao swings our attention back to the personal by situating this momentous death within a more privately momentous notion of the death of the mother.

The majesty of mother’s name is spread across the globe
There is peace and prosperity under the sun in her name
The sweetness of mother’s name imbues the human life force
She whose life reveals itself as the living, dazzling polestar
That great lady, Mother Victoria, has departed from this world. (1)

The mother here is both Victoria as mother of her subjects and a universal idea of motherhood that frames our relationship with the world. In doing so, Rao is able to register that this death is not simply

traumatic because of the departure of a very powerful political figure. This death is traumatic because as the death of the imperial mother, it leaves her Odia subjects rudderless without their “living, dazzling polestar.”

Furthermore, the reference to the power of the mother’s name to imbue human life force in her children invokes the connection between the mother goddess and the possibility of life that Rao repeatedly references in his poems about the nation and the goddess. In the next stanza we find that Victoria is compared with Hindu divine figures to underline her status within the empire, in language that would best situate her in the Odia idioms of greatness and power. She is called the Shankari or Laxmi of the British Empire. As the “owner of half the planet” and the empress of India, she is also described as “Nari Indrani” or a female Indra who ruled the heavens in Hindu tradition. She is “worshiped by all people” as a “Sati Siromani”—a superb jewel of a virtuous woman. She is the “imperial mother.”

Later in the poem, Rao compares her explicitly with Bharati or Goddess Saraswati. He writes:

Bringer of Hope to hopeless India
 Devi who looks like Bharati
 . . .
 That auspicious sound of Bharati’s veena
 Has aroused life in India. (8–9)

This reference to Victoria as Bharati follows the same pattern as Rao’s discussion of Indian underdevelopment and his exhortation of the goddess to come rescue India and breathe life into a listless nation in *Bharata Bhabana* (“Thoughts on India”).

In “Mahadevi Victoria,” this comparison is situated at the end of a series of stanzas that describe Victoria’s reign as good rule. Her reign is described as a reign of “friendship, compassion, affection and mercy” where the subjects of her rule (“praja”) are lovingly nurtured because Victoria’s “love for her praja is greater than her love for her own son” (4–5). The poem repeatedly refers to Victoria’s love for her “*praja santana*” (“subject-children”). This explicit configuration of the queen’s relationship with her Odia subject as that of mother and child conflates the notion of nurture and monarchy. This conflation is key to Rao’s understanding of Victoria’s rule as good rule.

Thus we see that three figures of feminine authority coalesce in Rao’s imagination of Victoria: goddess, mother, and monarch. In her

nurture of her subjects, Victoria is presented as the motherly monarch. This echoes English representations of Victoria as the nation's mother. In her ability to establish conditions of good rule and the foundations of tolerant civic society, Victoria is presented as a goddess who, like Goddess Saraswati, can breathe new life into comatose Indian society.

The poem ends with a discussion of Victoria as a virtuous woman and wife who has been pining for her departed husband.

You had been waiting to ascend to the heavens
 To go to your beloved
 At long last you will meet him in heaven
 Your fair soulmate
 Just as they were united
 Srirama and Sita, God has decreed
 The end of the pain of separation. (9)

This ending embeds the trace of another lament within Rao's lament for the queen. It is suggested here that while we may be lamenting the loss of the imperial mother, she herself has been lamenting her husband. While Rao's lament remains endlessly open, her lament has finally arrived at an end. In fact, the ending of her lament underlines the fact that Rao's lament does not seek to find a resolution. We find no discussion of a new emperor or a change of guard. The loss of the queen, like the loss of one's mother, is not mitigated by the promise of a new future.

6. CONCLUSION: INHABITING LAMENT AND FRAMING IMPERIAL BELONGING

What does Rao seek to achieve by maintaining this open-ended lamentation? Much like Jamadei in her bridal Kanda, the very act of lamenting without end sustains the subject's connection with the lost loved one. This raises the question, what is being connected in Rao's lament for the queen? In other words, to borrow Stephen Hopkin's words, what "work" are these tears doing for Rao? I would argue that it is not the connection with the queen that is being sustained through Rao's endless lament. Rather, he is holding on to a very precise idea of good rule. Victorian good rule, which displaced the acrimonious rule of the East India Company, was the promise of a nurturing imperial relationship between the sovereign and the Indian colonized subject. The commitment in the Queen's Proclamation of 1858 was that the Indian subject belonged with the sovereign within the empire. When we juxtapose the two poems discussed above, we can propose that the degraded position of Odisha described in "Utkal Janani Prati" makes it impossible to take Rao's

description of imperial good rule at face value. The good, nurturing rule that Rao has described in the poem is in fact an imperial fantasy of belonging and nurture. By inhabiting this lament, Rao is able to conjure up a possible form of rule that would deliver a life-inspiring Bharati-like push toward regeneration and development in stagnant colonial Odisha and India.

NOTES

I would like to thank Siddharth Satpathy, Miles Taylor, and Mandakini Dubey for inviting me to the workshop on vernacular representations of Victoria held at Ashoka University in spring 2021. I am especially grateful to Siddharth Satpathy and Mandakini Dubey for their detailed feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

1. Rao, *Mahadebi Victoria*, 1. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text. The original text is in Odia, and all translations are mine.
2. See, for instance, Chowdhury-Sengupta, “Mother India and Mother Victoria.” Chowdhury-Sengupta shows how the primary lens through which Victoria was viewed even in England was as a mother and a domestic figure. See also Homans, *Royal Representations*.
3. Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*.
4. Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, 2.
5. Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, 2.
6. Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, 4.
7. Kirby, “Remembrance of the Future.”
8. Hopkins, “Lament and the Work of Tears,” 109.
9. Hopkins, “Lament and the Work of Tears,” 109.
10. Hopkins, “Lament and the Work of Tears,” 109.
11. Parita, “The ‘Civilising Mission.’”
12. Parita, “The ‘Civilising Mission,’” 35.
13. Manicharana, *Brajabandhu Biraha*.
14. Mishra, “Fashioning Readers.”
15. Anonymous, *Durgadei Kanda*; Anonymous, *Jemadei Kanda*; Das, *Kumudei Kanda*; Sahu, *Rupadei Kanda*; Hamid M, *Sunajhia Kanda*.
16. Most of the copies we have are from the late 1920s and 1930s.
17. Anonymous, *Jemadei Kanda*, 6.
18. I would like to thank Siddharth Satpathy for his thoughts on this aspect of the lament.

19. Anonymous, *Jemadei Kanda*, 6.
20. Hopkins, "Lament and the Work of Tears," 126.
21. Siddharth Satpathy, *Familial Forms*, 2.
22. For instance, as a cyclone hit coastal Odisha in 1928 and caused the Mahanadi River to flood, leading to tremendous damage, there were a number of Kanda texts written to address this devastation. Odia poet and nationalist politician Kuntala Kumari Sabath wrote a collection of songs under the title *Odianka Kandana* ("The Weeping of the Odias"). Ostensibly these songs were conventional Kanda songs such as "Odia Bohura Kanda" ("The Lament of the Odia Bride"). However, this song was also about the wife mourning the death of her husband due to the floods as she consoles her mother-in-law. See Sabath, *Odianka Kandana*.
23. Utkal Sabha was established in Cuttack in 1878. See Dash, *Utkal Sammilani*. Ganjam Utkal Hitabadini Sabha at Berhampur (1872) and the Utkal Hitaisini Sabha in Parlakemidi (1890) were also established in this period. See Padhy and Satapathy, *Colonialism in Orissa*.
24. Mishra, *Language*, 76–105.
25. For a discussion of kingly sovereignty and its relationship with popular sovereignty see Mishra, *Language*, 106–30.
26. For a brief account of Rao's life, see Mohanty, *Madhusudan Rao*.
27. Mahapatra, "Appropriation, Coloniality and Ethics."
28. Mahapatra, "Appropriation, Coloniality and Ethics," 45.
29. Translation quoted from Mohanty, *Madhusudan Rao*, 75–76.
30. See Madhusudan Rao's "Radhanath Biyoge" in Rao, *Madhusudan Grantabali*, 312–313.
31. Rao, *Utkal Gatha*, 8. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text. The original text is in Odia, and all translations are mine.
32. For instance, Gangadhar Meher's long poem "Utkal Lakshmi," published in 1894, uses a geographical approach to describe the body of mother Utkal. See Gangadhara Mehera, *Gangadhar Meher*.
33. "Praja" here is translated as subject to a sovereign. However, praja can also be translated as progeny. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century discussions of regal sovereignty in Odisha, the two meanings are often conflated. Therefore, it is best to read this term as subject/progeny within this context; subjecthood at this time always carried within it the notion of the subject being in a familial relationship with the sovereign. See Mishra, *Language*, 103.

WORKS CITED

- Anonymous. *Durgadei Kanda*. Cuttack: Mukura Press, 1932.
- . *Jemadei Kanda*. Cuttack: Sriradharamana Press, 1959.
- Chowdhury-Sengupta, Indira. “Mother India and Mother Victoria: Motherhood and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal.” *South Asia Research* 12, no. 1 (1992): 20–37.
- Das, Ramachandra. *Kumudei Kanda*. 2nd ed. Cuttack: Anushodaya Press, 1933.
- Dash, Debendra Kumar. *Utkal Sammilani (1903–1936)*. Rourkela: Pragati Utkal Sangha, 2005.
- Eng, David L., and David Kazanjian. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Homans, Margaret. *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837–1876*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Hopkins, Stephen. “Lament and the Work of Tears: Andromache, Sita, Yashodhara.” In *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Emotions in Classical Indian Philosophy*, edited by Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, Heim Maria, and Roy Tzohar, 107–30. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.
- Kirby, Joan. “Remembrance of the Future: Derrida on Mourning.” *Social Semiotics* 16, no. 3 (2006): 461–72.
- M, Hamid. *Sunajhia Kanda*. 3rd ed. Cuttack: Ashutosh Press, 1941.
- Mahapatra, Ashok. “Appropriation, Coloniality and Ethics of Translation: Madhusudan Rao’s ‘Nirbasitara Bilapa’ and William Cowper’s ‘The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk.’” *Ravenshaw Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 35–48.
- Manicharana, Mahapatra. *Brajabandhu Biraha*. 2nd ed. Cuttack: Dutta Press, 1934.
- Mehera, Gangadhara. *Gangadhar Meher, Selected Works*. Translated by Madhusudana Paty. Sambalpur: Sambalpur University, 2001.
- Mishra, Pritipuspa. “Fashioning Readers: Canon, Criticism and Pedagogy in the Emergence of Modern Oriya Literature.” *Contemporary South Asia* 20, no. 1 (2012): 135–48.
- . *Language and the Making of Modern India : Nationalism and the Vernacular in Colonial Odisha, 1803–1956*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Mohanty, Jatindra. *Madhusudan Rao*. Kolkata: Sahitya Academi, 2005.
- Padhy, Subash Chandra, and Chittaranjan Satapathy. *Colonialism in Orissa: Resisting Colonialism—Shifting Paradigms*. Kolkata: R. N. Bhattacharya, 2006.
- Parita, Mukta. “The ‘Civilising Mission’: The Regulation and Control of Mourning in Colonial India.” *Feminist Review* 63 (1999): 25–47.
- Rao, Madhusudan. *Mahadebi Victoria*. Cuttack: Utkal Sahitya Press, 1901.
- . *Utkal Gatha*. 4th ed. Cuttack: Students Store, 1948.
- Rao, Prasant, ed. *Madhusudan Grantabali*. Cuttack: Utkal Sahitya Press, 1915.
- Sabath, Kuntala Kumari. *Odianka Kandana*. Cuttack: Manmohan Press, 1936.
- Sahu, Krushnachandra. *Rupadei Kanda*. 1st ed. Cuttack: G. S. Press, 1928.
- Satpathy, Siddharth. *Familial Forms: Literature and Sympathy in Colonial Odisha*. Unpublished manuscript.