What if the Author of the *Mokṣopāya* Were a Woman?

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The *Mokṣopāya* (MU) is an anonymous text from tenth century Kashmir deemed to have been composed by a single author who has, until now, been assumed by scholars who work on the text to be male.[1] This assumption is made known by the exclusive use of male pronouns when discussing MU authorship. The MU is a unique text for its period, both stylistically and philosophically. Formally, the text is neither exclusively *kāvya* nor *śāstra*; it has passages of poetic verse (*kāvya*), prose (*gadya*), story (*kathā*), and didactic instruction (*śāstra*). While the MU refers to itself as the *sarvasiddhāntasiddhānta* (the definitive philosophical position of all final positions), and the narratives themselves are meant to be *dṛṣṭāntas* – true examples of the philosophy expressed in the text that will guide the hearer to experience its teachings first-hand – the philosophy of the MU does not align with any known tradition. The MU has Buddhist elements, but no overt Buddhist content. Likewise, there are tantric traces and some tantric content, but the text has none of the formal qualities of a tantra. The MU is intertextual, like the epics and purāṇas, but it is not an epic, nor is it a purāṇa. Like the *Mahābhārata,* the MU consists of a central narrative with sub-tales woven throughout, but, unlike that epic, the MU has a consistency that provides convincing evidence of single authorship.[2]

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1. This paper engages with the Sanskrit text of the *Mokṣopāya*, utilizing the critical edition of the MU edited by scholars of the Mokṣopāya Project in Halle and Marburg under the direction of Walter Slaje and published in six volumes (Walter Slaje, ed., *Mokṣopāya*: *historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe*, *Teil 1-7* [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011-2018]). From this critical edition, I specifically draw upon: *Mokṣopāya: Das Dritte Buch. Utpattiprakaraṇa,* ed. Jürgen Hanneder, Peter Stephan, and Stanislav Jager (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), and *Mokṣopāya: Das Sechste Buch, Nirvāṇaprakaraṇa (1. Teil: Kapitel 1–119),* ed. Susanne Krause-Stinner and Peter Stephan Jager (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018).
2. According to Jürgen Hanneder, the indigenous Kashmirian tradition of the text assumes a single authorship. Clues within the MU itself also support this claim, as there is evidence of an overall plan to the work. In other words, intertextual relationships exist between sections

While the *Mahābhārata* was composed through layers of textual accretions over centuries, the MU was conceived as a single cohesive literary work by an unknown author. The MU tells purāṇic stories, but it has neither the structure, the thematic content, nor the stated goals of a purāṇic text. While some of the stories do recount known purāṇic myths, many are new and "without parallel in Indian literature."[3] The MU thus appears to be a new genre construction that has no precedent. It is a blend of philosophy, story, poetry and tantra (both Śaiva and Buddhist), and refers to itself as a *śāstra* that consists of a collection (*saṃhitā*)[4] of ornamented (*nānālaṅkārabhūṣitam*) good sayings (*sūkta, vākya,* or *vacas*)[5] narrated by someone who has attained the supreme goal (*āptoktivarṇitā*).[6] All we know

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of the text. For example, the Līlā story – initially told in the *Utpattiprakaraṇa* (Book 3) – is retold in the *Nirvāṇaprakaraṇa* from the perspective of Līlā's husband, King Sindhu. Many *ākhyānas* rely on philosophical sections for meaning, which indicates that both *ākhyāna* and *śāstra* are part of a planned and interrelated structure. Characters in Daśaratha's *sabhā* are also in the stories, which shows a connectedness between the discourse, story and frame of the text. It is also possible to interpret the entire MU as a representation of Rāma's gradual enlightenment. Early on, Vasiṣṭha tells Rāma that he is not yet ready to receive the answers to some of the questions that he has asked, because he is still *aprabuddha*; later, Rāma is told that he is now *prabuddha*, and the deferred questions are acknowledged and answered. Hanneder also suggests, as does Christopher Key Chapple, that we can read the *prakaraṇas* as stages of Rāma's gradual enlightenment: Rāma first experiences dispassion in the *Vairagyaprakaraṇa*; he desires liberation in *Mumukṣuprakaraṇa*; he begins the path in *Utpattiprakaraṇa*; he is established in *Sthitiprakaraṇa*; he experiences release or tranquility in *Upaśāmaprakaraṇa*; and finally, he attains mokṣa in *Nirvāṇaprakaraṇa*. See: Jürgen Hanneder, "The Mokṣopāya: An Introduction," in *The Mokṣopāya, Yogavāsiṣṭha and Related Texts* (Aachen: Shaker, 2005), 9-19; Hanneder, *Studies on the Mokṣopāya* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006); Christopher Key Chapple, "The Sevenfold Yoga of the Yogavāsiṣṭha," in *Yoga in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 117-132.

3. Hanneder, *Studies,* 71.

4. *mokṣopāyābhidhāneyaṃ saṃhitā sārasammitā |*
triṃśad dve ca sahasrāṇi jñātā nirvāṇadāyinī ‖ 2.17.6 ‖

5. *tvam etayākhaṇḍitayā guṇalakṣmyā samāśritaḥ |*
manomohaharaṃ vākyaṃ vakṣyamāṇam idaṃ śṛṇu ‖ 2.17.3 ‖
pāvanānām udārāṇāṃ parabodhaikadāyinām |
vacasāṃ bhājanaṃ bhūtyai bhavyo bhavati nādhamaḥ ‖ 2.17.5 ‖
yuktiyuktārthavākyāni kalpitāni pṛthak pṛthak |
dṛṣṭāntasārasūktāni cāsyāṃ prakaraṇāni ṣaṭ ‖ 2.17.10 ‖

6. *svayaṃ jñātā śrutā vāpi bhrāntiśāntyaiva saukhyadā |*
āptoktivarṇitā sadyo yathāmṛtataraṅgiṇī ‖ 2.17.8 ‖

for sure, based on internal and external evidence, is that the MU can be approximately dated to the mid-tenth century,[7] right in the middle of the formative period of the *Trika* school of Kashmir Śaivism, which eventually became known as the *Pratyabhijñā* school. And yet, the MU is absolutely not a *Pratyabhijñā* text.[8]

The question that guides the discussion of this paper – *What if the author of the Mokṣopāya were a woman?* – arises out of my own curiosity about the mysterious origins of the MU, along with my interest in particular passages within the text that demonstrate an attitude toward women not often seen in South Asian philosophical and narrative literature. To pursue this line of inquiry, I have broken this overarching question down into three sub-questions: Why hasn't anyone asked this question before? What evidence in the text makes female authorship even possible or

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7. Evidence of the earliest date that the MU could have been composed (950 CE) is based on the mention of King Yaśaskaradeva, who reigned in Kashmir from 939-948 CE, in a story that prophesies his reign. This was first noted by Prahlad C. Divanji (see "The Date and Origin of the Yogavāsiṣṭha," in *Proceedings of the Seventh All India Oriental Conference* [Baroda: 1933], 21-23). Evidence of the latest possible date of the composition of the MU is based on mention of this text in Kṣemendra's *kavikaṇṭhābharaṇa* (ca. 990-1066 CE), where it is cited immediately after the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a requisite text that any aspiring poet must have read. Hanneder speculates that this citation was likely overlooked by previous scholars because a *Mokṣopāya* could just refer to a "means to liberation" rather than the text in question, which "was hardly known" by later scholars who only had access to the *Yogavāsiṣṭha,* the much later and highly redacted recension of the MU (*Studies*, 42). Hanneder also notes that "although the text is not quoted literally, we have here its proper name and its placement within a canon of literature at an appropriate slot, namely immediately after the *Rāmāyaṇa*" (*Studies*, 42). This citation indicates that the MU was well known in Kṣemendra's time, "which narrows the time-span towards the middle of the tenth century" (*Studies*, 42). Furthermore, Hanneder has identified a partial quote from the MU in Utpaladeva's (ca. 925-975 CE) commentary on the *Spandakārikā*, which also appears in Rāmakaṇṭha's Sarvatobhadra (mid-tenth century CE) (*Studies*, 41-46). However, scholars since Divanji have noted the existence of up to three different Kashmiri Rāmakaṇṭha's, so these citations do not contribute to any true accuracy with regard to dating the text.

8. Hanneder notes that key technical terms from Kashmir Śaivism, such as *vimarśa*, do not occur in the MU at all, and, furthermore, that although there are significant resemblances to elements drawn from various streams of Tantric Śaivism, "the tendency we find, as in other instances, is that of a reinterpretation that deconstructs the forms and identities of conventional deities. It seems that quite often research scholars have noted the detailed description of the deities, but not taken into account that they are later reduced to pure consciousness by the author" (*Studies*, 148; 186).

something to consider? Do the social conditions within which our author existed support such a possibility? The first and third of these questions are historical. While the first addresses assumptions that underlie ideas about women and women's history in Indological scholarship, the third prompts an examination of the particular historical context of tenth century Kashmir, as well as a consideration of the most common paradigm of female authorship that existed in medieval north India: that of the wandering female bhakti poet saint. The second question is textual; it is not answered here by means of a thorough philological analysis of the text's deep linguistic structures, but rather is dealt with by examining the work's narrative content and interrogating the recurring themes that can be read to suggest the possibility of female authorship. Overall, this paper presents a discussion prompted by a question that can never be answered definitively. Nonetheless, I think it is an interesting and important discussion to have; a worthwhile thought experiment[9] that highlights and challenges scholarly assumptions as it unfolds.[10]

Why Hasn't Anyone Asked this Question Before?

In a co-authored work entitled "In Search of Our Past: A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early India," Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy outline two vantage points for approaching women's history in India.[11] The first approach they outline is the one taken by early Western scholars, who drew on brahmanical texts and brahmanical informants to reconstruct a historical picture of women in ancient and medieval India. This approach unfolds as a modern-style grand narrative that depicts a pristine golden period in Vedic times, followed by a trajectory of social decline that extends to the present. This position

9. I thank Max Mehener for this useful phrase communicated in a personal text message conversation, January 2019.

10. I am grateful for the many comments and helpful suggestions that I received when I presented this paper at the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto as part of my Doctoral Candidate Colloquium in January, 2019. Many thanks to Srilata Raman, Reid Locklin, Judith Newman and others. I have also benefitted greatly from suggestions made by John Nemec in personal conversation (March, 2019).

11. Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy, "In Search of Our Past: A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 18 (1988): WS2-10.

overlooks the obvious caste and gender bias inherent in relying on texts that denigrate women and which women did not themselves produce.[12] Moreover, Chakravarti and Roy challenge this view, noting that there was no gradual historical decline, but rather an ongoing and compounding trend of treating women and their sexuality as a threat.[13] The Vedic period was not a golden period for women. The Vedas themselves show evidence that women were frequently slaves, that they were considered to be demonic and sexually driven, and also that they were a threat to the purity of Vedic ritual.[14] While evidence shows that women did participate in Vedic rituals,[15] control over their sexuality was held by men – men who created rules to maintain a social hierarchy rooted in concerns over caste purity.[16] This trend of control by means of textual depiction extended from the Vedic period throughout the development of brahmanical literature. There was no gradual historical decline, but rather an ongoing, compounding trend of treating women and their sexuality as a threat.[17]

For instance, during the second urbanization (800-600 BCE) in the *Dharmaśāstra* period, private control over land made inheritance and patrilineal succession important for both kings and brahman priests. While the former wanted to guard legitimate hereditary succession to the throne, the latter wanted to maintain caste purity.[18] The free movement and potential sexual agency of women became a source of concern, and texts produced at this time sought to curb this threat by demonizing women.[19] For example,

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12. Kumkum Roy, "Introduction," in *Women in Early Indian Societies*, ed. Kumkum Roy (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1999), 8-9.

13. Chakravarti, "Brahmanical Patriarchy," 582.

14. Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 14 (1993): 580.

15. See: Stephanie W. Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

16. Chakravarti, "Brahmanical Patriarchy," 581; Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, *Class, Caste and Religion in Medieval India: Social History of Transition Failure* (Kolkata: Mitram, 2013), 70.

17. Chakravarti, "Brahmanical Patriarchy," 582.

18. Chakravarti, "Brahmanical Patriarchy," 581-582.

19. Chakravarti finds three levels of control over women's sexuality in the brahmanical tradition. The first, ideological control, frames women's "essential nature" (*strīsvabhāva*) as dirty, sexual, sinful and full of wanton desire. This ideological construct therefore justifies restraining women. It can be seen in early brahmanical texts – such as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* or the

the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* says that "a woman, a śūdra, a dog and a crow are the embodiments of untruth, sin, and darkness [XIV.11.31]," and the *Manusmṛti* identifies women as lying, deceitful, treacherous and equivalent to poison, snakes, fire and the sharp edge of a razor.[20] This literature does not tell the story of the lived experience of women. It rather tells the story of men's attitudes towards women, attitudes which have somehow served as evidence for women's experience and reality. This, in turn, erases the role of women in social production and marginalizes their experiences within the context of the broader social world[21] – even early social reformers relied on the texts and testimony of upper-class brahman men when selecting female-oriented issues worthy of protest.[22] This approach thus treats all women as if they constitute a single "monolithic, homogeneous, and somewhat passive social category," and ignores the lived reality of women whose life experiences and concerns lie outside the scope and geographical location of

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Manusmṛti – as well as in *smṛti* literature, particularly the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, where women are depicted as weak, fickle, disloyal, deceitful, cunning and driven by sexual desire. It is primarily upper caste women who internalize this construct, causing them to adopt a self-imposed self-restraint for the sake of spiritual transcendence. Chakravarti calls this a "theology of subordination." The second means of control relates to community and family, and specifically refers to how wives are compelled to depend on their husbands and their husbands' extended family. This means of control, while rooted in ideologically based notions of *strīdharma* and *pativrata,* is maintained through the threat of violence, abandonment and other forms of family-based punishment. The *Dharmaśāstras*, especially *Manusmṛti*, articulate the laws for this level of control. The third form of control is state-based. Following the *Arthaśāstra*, the state can impose fines, enact force, verbally restrain, or even abuse women in order to control their behaviour, thereby justifying male violence toward women. As Chakravarti notes, while the *strīsvabhāva* of upper caste women is described as inherently sexual and out of control, śūdras are described as having a lowly and subservient nature. While the former are told that their dharma requires them to be the opposite, the latter are told that their dharma requires them to be just that. Chakravarti interprets this discrepancy to mean that controlled sexuality was not originally part of the system, but rather introduced later when "women's sexuality […] had […] become a problem; their essential natures, their maternal power, had to be organised and ordered by paternal power in the emerging class-based societies to serve the new social and political arrangements organised by men of the dominant classes" ("Brahmanical Patriarchy," 582-583).

20. Chakravarti, "Brahmanical Patriarchy," 581.

21. Chakravarti and Roy, "In Search of Our Past," WS-5.

22. Chakravarti and Roy, "In Search of Our Past," WS-3. See also: Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987): 119-156.

brahmanical textual authority.[23]

The second approach Chakravarti and Roy outline is the effort to reconstruct the social, political, economic, religious, and gendered contexts of women's past lived experience. This approach draws from a broad range of source materials that exceeds the range delimited by the brahmanical Sanskrit corpus, such as inscriptions, visual art, the archaeological record, and texts in Prakrit, Pali, and local vernacular languages. The focus here is on a recognition of the wider social context of each historical moment.[24] This approach thus recognizes women's experiences and draws upon evidence from their contributions, thereby framing them as social agents who have been present and active in the creation and maintenance of social worlds throughout history. This approach privileges specific historical moments and circumstances, eschewing overarching evolutionary generalizations that frequently only reflect the ideological position of the historian and the source material that s/he has chosen. In other words, this is an approach that recognizes the diverse complexity of each historical moment, and acknowledges that women are social, political and moral agents who work and produce cultural objects within complex social environments. This treatment of women in Indic history thus draws from a diverse range of cultural evidence to highlight instances of female agency and write a history that is more inclusive of women.

Feminist historians and Gender Studies scholars in India have embraced this more nuanced, situated, and local approach to history, acknowledging that women have to "re-create their own histories" by "putting women back into the historical canvas," to "redress historical imbalances and contribute to a more meaningful understanding of the past by restoring women's agency."[25] Vijaya Ramaswamy calls this kind of scholarship "academic activism," and identifies four primary areas of focus:[26] (1) re-examining texts traditionally

23. Chakravarti and Roy, "In Search of Our Past," WS-3; Kumkum Roy, "Gender Relations During the First Millennium: An Overview," in *The Power of Gender & the Gender of Power: Explorations in Early Indian History* (New Delhi & Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2010), 196.

24. Roy, "Gender Relations," 197.

25. Vijaya Ramaswamy, "Women's Agency in Indian History and Culture," in *Privileging Women Agency in History: Work, Worship, Leisure, and Pleasure*, ed. I. Lakshmi and A. Satyanarayana (New Delhi: Research India Press, 2012), 3.

26. Ramaswamy, "Women's Agency," 3-4. In addition to the following, Ramaswamy also de-

understood to be "male" through a gynocritical lens;[27] (2) documenting women's work in society by emphasizing the work of non-brahman and subaltern women and the interrelationship of caste, class and gender;[28]

lineates a fifth approach that she simply calls "women on women" with no further explanation.

27. Ramaswamy, "Women's Agency," 3. For an example of this focus, see: Padmanabh S. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); José Ignacio Cabezón, ed., *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992); Miranda Eberle Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Julia Leslie, ed., *Myth and Mythmaking* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996); Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife*; Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2000); Laurie L. Patton, ed., *Jewels of Authority: Women and Textual Tradition in Hindu India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Tracy Pintchman, ed., *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Vinita Chandra, *Gender Relations in Early India* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010); Karen Muldoon-Hules, *Brides of the Buddha: Nuns' Stories from the Avadanasataka* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

28. See, for instance: Gail Omvedt, "Class, Caste and Land in India: An Introductory Essay," in *Land, Caste, and Politics in Indian States*, ed. Gail Omvedt (Delhi: Authors Guild Publications, 1982); Kumkum Roy, "Defining the Household: Some Aspects of Prescription and Practice in Early India," *Social Scientist* 22, no. 1/2 (1994): 3-18; Anil Kumar Tyagi, *Women Workers in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Radha Publications, 1994); Leslie Orr, "Women's Wealth and Worship," in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, ed. M. Bose, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124-147; Leslie Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Leslie Orr, "Domesticity and Difference/Women and Men: Religious Life in Medieval Tamilnadu," in *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 109-130; Uma Chakravarti, "A Glance at the Word Jāti in the Vedic Literature," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 86 (2005): 127-130; K. Ilaiah, *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse on Dalit-Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2009); I. Lakshmi and A. Satyanarayana, eds., *Privileging Women Agency in History: Work, Worship, Leisure, and Pleasure* (New Delhi: Research India Press, 2012); Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, *Class, Caste and Religion in Medieval India: Social History of Transition Failure* (Kolkata: Mitram, 2013); Subhadra Channa, *Gender in South Asia: Social Imagination and Constructed Realities* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Manuela Ciotti, "Dalit Women Between Social and Analytical Alterity: Rethinking the 'Quintessentially Marginal,'" in *Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia*, ed. Leela Fernandes (London: Routledge, 2014), 305-317; Nandita Prasad Sahai and Kumkum Roy, eds., *Looking Within, Looking Without: Exploring Households in the Subcontinent Through Time: Essays in Memory of Nandita Prasad Sahai* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2015); Padma Velaskar, "Theorising the Interaction of Caste, Class and Gender: A Feminist Sociological Approach," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 50, no. 3 (2016): 389-414; Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering*

(3) critically analyzing women's social movements;[29] (4) interpreting the expressions and writings of women in vernacular languages.[30] This strand

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Caste Through a Feminist Lens (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2018).

29. See: Julia Leslie and Mary McGee, eds., *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion, and Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); K.S. Singh, "Tribal Women: Resurrection, Demystification, and Gender Struggle," in *Breaking out of Invisibility: Women in Indian History*, ed. Aparna Basu and Anup Taneja (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre in association with Indian Council of Historical Research, 2002), 206-231; Vijaya Ramaswamy, "Transition: Gender Politics and Literature in Tamil Nadu," in *Breaking out of Invisibility: Women in Indian History*, ed. Aparna Basu and Anup Taneja (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre in association with Indian Council of Historical Research, 2002), 166-187; Andal Narayanan, *Women and Indian Society: Options and Constraints* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2002); Jasbir Jain, *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2011); Smita Agarwal, "The Other Voices: In Search of Justice," in *Privileging Women Agency in History: Work, Worship, Leisure, and Pleasure*, ed. I. Lakshmi and A. Satyanarayana (New Delhi: Research India Press, 2012), 193-215; S. Mahaboob Basha, "Spreading the Fragrance of Sisterhood: Women's Organizations and Consciousness in Colonial Andhra, 1902-1947," in *Privileging Women Agency in History: Work, Worship, Leisure, and Pleasure*, ed. I. Lakshmi and A. Satyanarayana (New Delhi: Research India Press, 2012), 136-192; Rukmini Sen, "Mapping Women's Activism in India: Resistances, Reforms, and (Re)-Creation," in *Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia*, ed. Leela Fernandes (London: Routledge, 2014), 333-346.

30. See: Gloria Goodwin Raheja, "Women's Speech Genres, Kinship and Contradiction," in *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*, ed. Nita Kumar (New Delhi: Stree in association with the Book Review Literary Trust, 1994), 49-80; Leslie A. Flemmin, "Between Two Worlds: Self-Construction and Self-Identity in the Writings of Three Nineteenth-Century Indian Christian Women," in *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*, ed. Nita Kumar (New Delhi: Stree in association with the Book Review Literary Trust, 1994), 49-80; Srabashi Ghosh, "'Birds in a Cage': Changes in Bengali Social Life as Recorded in Autobiographies by Women," in *Ideals, Images, and Real Lives: Women in Literature and History*, ed. Alice Thorner and Maithreyi Krishna Raj (Mumbai: Published for Sameeksha Trust [by] Orient Longman, 2000), 37-67; Meera Kosambi, "Women, Emancipation and Equality: Pandita Ramabai's Contribution to Women's Cause," in *Ideals, Images, and Real Lives: Women in Literature and History*, ed. Alice Thorner and Maithreyi Krishna Raj (Mumbai: Published for Sameeksha Trust [by] Orient Longman, 2000), 104-144; S. Anandhi, "Representing Devadasis: 'Dasigal Mosavalai' as a Radical Text," in *Ideals, Images, and Real Lives: Women in Literature and History*, ed. Alice Thorner and Maithreyi Krishna Raj (Mumbai: Published for Sameeksha Trust [by] Orient Longman, 2000), 233-253; Baisali Hui, "Difficult Daughters: A (Sub) Version of the Woman's Identity," in *Changing Faces of Indian Women*, ed. Anita Bagchi and Sanjay K. Roy (Kolkata: Levant Books, 2009), 147-156; B. Ashok, "Question of Self Identity, Gender, Equality, Struggle and Justice in Bama's 'Karukku'," in *Privileging Women Agency in History: Work, Worship, Leisure, and Pleasure*, ed. I. Lakshmi and A. Satyanarayana (New Delhi: Research India Press,

of feminist scholarship demonstrates that Indian women were never just passive recipients of patriarchal social and religious traditions, but rather have always been active social agents at work in various social worlds. I suggest that it is the lingering influence of the first approach that has kept scholars from inquiring into whether the anonymous author of the MU could be female. However, as this second approach demonstrates, women have always been wise, intelligent, intentional, and purposeful social agents at work in their cultural worlds. Accordingly, there is no reason to assume that this type of authorship – i.e., the successful production of a socially and culturally recognized object of enduring value – could not have been undertaken by a woman. In what follows, I will explore the textual evidence for this alternative reading.

What Evidence in the Text Makes Female Authorship Even Possible or Something to Consider?

In the *Mokṣopāya*, the two longest narratives are stories of queens where the enlightened master is female. Thus, there is a strong feminine voice in the text. The first of these narratives is the Līlā story, which takes place in the third book, *sargas* 3.15 to 3.36. This is the first and longest major narrative in the MU.[31] As the story goes, Līlā, wife of Padma, decides that she wants to prolong her husband's life out of fear of separation, so she performs austerities to gain magic powers (*siddhi*). She also worships the goddess Sarasvatī as *Jñāptī*. In truth, the goddess Sarasvatī is none other than Līlā's own highest wisdom, her own *Jñāptī*. Regardless, Sarasvatī grants Līlā two boons as a reward for her austerities: first, her husband will not leave her room upon death, and second, Sarasvatī will come whenever Līlā calls. When Padma dies, Sarasvatī is called and the goddess counsels Līlā on how to deal with the body. Then the goddess takes the queen on a seemingly lengthy journey (it really only lasts moments) through future and past lifetimes, historically real yet conjured in the imaginations of the travelers at the very same time. During this journey the goddess instructs the queen on the true nature of reality as unreality, the illusoriness of space and time, the nature of consciousness, non-existent emptiness, oneness, life, death,

2012), 17-23.

31. The story is brought back in 6.315.1, but from the perspective of Sindhu, Līlā's husband.

reincarnation, idealist causality, and more. By means of this instruction, Līlā becomes enlightened. The important point to note here is that Līlā, the female protagonist and seeker of higher knowledge in this story, is brought to enlightenment by a feminine power, the goddess Sarasvatī, who is really, ultimately, Līlā's own already existent higher knowing, her *Jñāptī*.

The Cūḍālā story occurs in *sargas* 6.81-114 of the last book of the *Mokṣopāya*, the *Nirvāṇaprakaraṇa*. As noted above, this story is also one of the longest narratives in the *Mokṣopāya*. Cūḍālā is a young queen married to King Śikhidvaja. Cūḍālā attains enlightenment and supernatural powers by means of her own self-initiated contemplations. When she attempts to share her newfound knowledge with her husband, he rebuffs and belittles her. The queen overlooks her husband's disinterest and continues with her own business in an enlightened state for many years, playing with her superpowers and rejoicing in her experience of enlightenment. Eventually, Śikhidvaja becomes disillusioned with material existence, renounces his kingdom against the counsel of his own wife, and escapes to the forest to seek enlightenment by living as an ascetic in an isolated hut far away. Cūḍālā rules the kingdom while the king practices austerities for eighteen years, until he is ready to receive instruction from her. After the eighteen years pass, Cūḍālā uses her spiritual powers to fly to the king's dwelling place. She transforms herself into a male brahman and enlightens Śikhidvaja through her teaching. Then, Śikhidvaja and Cūḍālā in the form of the male Brahman spend time together in the forest as enlightened friends. Eventually, Cūḍālā wants to have sex with her husband, so she tells him that she – the male brahman – has been cursed to become female at night. After only a few days, Cūḍālā (as the male brahman) transforms into a female at night, and she and Śikhidvaja get married, become lovers and spend time as male friends during the day and male-female lovers at night. Śikhidvaja does not recognize his wife until Cūḍālā reveals her true identity to him and convinces him to return to the kingdom with her. Then Śikhidvaja rules as king for ten thousand years.

It is interesting to note that, in this story, in order for her teachings to be heard, Cūḍālā has to change into a man. Furthermore, in order to become a lover, Cūḍālā has to change genders again. Wendy Doniger has noted these gender transfers as well:

This extraordinary openness to gender bending in ancient India may be an indirect benefit of the rigid social order: Since other social categories are taken for granted, the text can use them as a springboard for gender role-playing. But the roles, when we look closer, revert to the rigid categories in the end. Chudala has to become a man to teach her husband, and she has to become a woman again to sleep with him. In the Hindu view, Chudala is like a man to begin with, aggressive, resourceful, and wise. Moreover, the relationship between Chudala and the king is never the relationship of a real husband and wife. She is a magician; in other times and places she might have been called a witch. She functions like a Yogini (she can fly) or perhaps even a goddess, giving him her grace and leading him up the garden path of enlightenment, setting up a divine illusion and then revealing herself to him as the gods reveal themselves.[32]

Here Doniger tries to find a paradigm to fit Cūḍālā into, but beyond the illusory surface of gender bending, the enlightened teacher in this story is a human woman who has attained superpowers by virtue of her own resources. Within the context of the discussion that guides this paper, it is fascinating to note that the female guru has to disguise herself as a male in order for her knowledge to be accepted by her male student. If the author of the *Mokṣopāya* were a woman, perhaps she would have posed as a male to be heard as a teacher.

Another passage that may support the hypothesis of female authorship can be found prior to Vasiṣṭha's dialogue with Śiva in *sargas* 6.30-46 of the *Nirvāṇaprakaraṇa*, immediately following the Bhusuṇḍa story. Before the philosophical dialogue between Śiva and Vasiṣṭha begins, Śiva approaches Vasiṣṭha holding the hand of his wife Pārvatī. Vasiṣṭha greets Śiva with the usual ritual of foot bathing, and after the honours have been done and accepted, Pārvatī asks after Vasiṣṭha's wife, Arundhatī. It seems that she wants to have girl talk. The two women exchange their own ritual greetings, and then leave their husbands to chat on their own. This minor episode of only four stanzas (6.33.2-5) suggests the divine nature of mundane feminine interactions, which can be read as a validation of women's interpersonal/social experience. Here we see two goddesses portrayed as average women and, conversely, womanhood elevated to the level of goddesses. And yet, the philosophical conversation takes place among the men. The division between speaking philosophically as a man and speaking relationally as a

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32. Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 521.

woman is once again reinforced.[33] But we do not need to take this distinction literally. It is not that only men are philosophers and only women have relationships. Rather, as we have seen through Cūḍālā's example, in this tradition, any one individual is free to take on any gender role at any time for an intended purpose.[34] Thus I wonder, could the author of the *Mokṣopāya* have been a woman?

Do the Social Conditions Within Which our Author Existed Support Such a Possibility?

Here, the question becomes: Is it historically possible that in tenth century Kashmir the author of the *Mokṣopāya* could have been a woman? In other words, what was happening in Kashmir during the time our anonymous author was active? In its early history, Kashmir was a secluded, remote land in the valley of the Vitastā (Jhelum) river, surrounded by mountains that made access to the valley difficult. The inaccessibility of the region served to preserve its ancient culture, and allowed for unique social, economic and religious structures to develop.[35] Kashmir was open to the west rather than the Hindu south, and so it is not surprising that there is little evidence of Hindu activity in the region prior to the end of the Kidarite period in the fifth century CE.[36] The earliest material evidence of pre-Islamic religion

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33. I am grateful to Kashi Gomez for helping me think about these questions via Skype conversation (April, 2019).

34. Gender fluid identities are a common trope in South Asian mythological literature. For example, see: Wendy Doniger, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Robert P. Goldman, "Transsexualism, Gender, and Anxiety in Traditional India," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 3 (July 1993): 374-401; Devdutt Pattanaik, ed., *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales of Hindu Lore,* Haworth Gay & Lesbian Studies (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002); Geeta Patel, "Home, Homo, Hybrid: Translating Gender," *College Literature* 24, no. 1 (2007): 133-150; Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Adnan Hossain, "Beyond Emasculation: Being Muslim and Becoming Hijra in South Asia," *Asian Studies Review* 36, no. 4 (2012): 495-513.

35. Devika Rangachari, *Invisible Women, Visible Histories: Gender, Society, and Polity in North India, Seventh to Twelfth Century AD* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2009), 48.

36. Alexis Sanderson, "Kashmir," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism, Volume One: Regions, Pilgrimage, Deities,* ed. Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, and Vasudha Narayanan (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 100-101.

in Kashmir is Buddhist, and Kashmir was religiously syncretistic prior to the arrival of Islam.[37] Archaeological evidence shows the existence of Buddhist, Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Smārta traditions.[38] The second half of the first millennium was a very prolific time for Sanskrit literary production in Kashmir, and works produced during this time cover a wide range of topics, including religious mythology, grammar, literary theory, court poetry, drama, philosophy and tantra.[39]

Political life in first millennium Kashmir readily deviated from the rigid gender proscriptions of the normative Hindu social and political values found in the south. While brahmanical literature expresses blatant hostility toward the idea of female rulership, female agency and power were accepted in medieval Kashmir.[40] Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅginī* (ca. 1149 CE) reports that Kashmir had three female rulers by Kalhaṇa's time: Yaśovatī (n.d.) who ruled in the distant mythical Gonanda dynasty, Sugandhā (904-906 CE) of the Utpala dynasty, and Diddā (980/1-1003CE) of the Yaśaskara dynasty. In addition to these three rulers, Kalhaṇa reports that connections to women and their families inspired four out of the six dynastic shifts in Kashmir, in direct contradistinction to the rules for royal succession laid out in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Arthaśāstra,* and the *Dharmaśāstras* of Manu, Nārada, and Yajñavalkya.[41] Frequently, lovers, low caste individuals, women, minor relatives, and so on ascended to the throne through marriage and scheming, and dynasties were created and destroyed by the power of female agency.[42]

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37. Sanderson, "Kashmir," 101-104.

38. Sanderson, "Kashmir," 104.

39. John Nemec suggests that this productivity was due to royal patronage, the relative safety from external military threat due to territorial seclusion, cosmopolitanism brought about by merchants and scholars traveling to and from the valley, trade prosperity derived from proximity to the Silk Road trade route along with agricultural self-sufficiency, open-minded humanistic thinking, sectarian cross-pollination from religious syncretism, and inspiration from the incredible beauty of the land itself (Nemec, "Innovation and Social Change in the Vale of Kashmir, circa 900-1250 CE," in *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions: Proceedings from A Symposium in Honour of Alexis G. Sanderson*, ed. Dominic Goodall and Shaman Hatley [Brill, Forthcoming], 4-5).

40. As seen in evidence provided by the *Dharmaśāstra* and the *Mahābhārata*. See Rangachari, *Invisible Women*, 84.

41. Rangachari, *Invisible Women*, 92.

42. Rangachari, *Invisible Women*, 93.

The *Kuṭṭanimatam*, dated to the eighth century CE, describes courtesans being invited to attend coronation ceremonies and royal anniversaries, indicating that transgressions and social reversals were commonplace in medieval Kashmir around the time that our anonymous author was active.[43] Rangachari suggests that "the prominence accorded to the [goddess] in the legends of origin seems to be a precedent for, and reflection of, the gender relations in early Kashmir, and seems to set the tone for the acceptance of women rulers."[44] The *Nīlamatapurāṇa*, dated sometime between the seventh and eight centuries, tells that the land of Kashmir is a manifestation of the goddess Pārvatī. This means that the ruler of the land was deemed to be a form of Śiva, the lord of Pārvatī[45] – in other words, no matter what the embodied sex of the sovereign ruler may be, s/he is always Śiva, at least partially.[46] Moreover, as the land and its rivers were known to be manifestations of different goddesses, Rangachari suggests this might "imply the superiority of females over males and, by extension, the possibility of reversing traditional gender equations in actual life."[47] However, it is important to note that the deification of land and rivers as feminine goddesses is actually common in all of India.[48]

Walter Slaje (1996) has speculated that the MU could evidence an oral tradition based on the teachings of an unknown master – teachings which were never formalized and then died out.[49] I ask, why could this master not have been a woman? In today's spiritual landscape, there are many female Hindu and Buddhist spiritual masters whose authority is well accepted. It is unlikely that this acceptance of female power is an exclusively modern phenomenon. Tantric traditions developed and thrived in the

43. Rangachari, *Invisible Women*, 84, 98-99; As Ray notes in *Early History,* this is also indicated in Kṣemendra's *Deśopadeśa*, *Narmamālā,* and *Samayamātṛkā* (116).
44. Rangachari, *Invisible Women*, 85.
45. Rangachari, *Invisible Women*, 85-86; Sanderson, "Kashmir," 111.
46. An interesting corroboration of this idea comes from the fact that two historical queens, Sugandhā and Diddā, were referred to in inscriptions and coins with the masculine deva rather than the feminine devī (Rangachari, *Invisible Women*, 128, 92).
47. Rangachari, *Invisible Women*, 85 and 117.
48. While India itself is identified as the goddess Bhārat Mātā (Mother India), the land is Bhū Devī, and every river is its own feminine deity. Rivers as a whole are understood to be the manifestation of the one Gaṅgā.
49. Bruno Lo Turco, "Towards a Chronology of the Yogavāsiṣṭha/Mokṣopāya," *Annali* 62 (2002): 44.

isolated syncretic environment of medieval Kashmir, and these traditions consistently advocated for the transgression of brahmanical boundaries of caste and gender purity. For instance, the "post-scriptural" exegetical tradition of Kashmir Śaivism that came to be known as the *Pratyabhijñā* School was in its early stages of development when the *Mokṣopāya* was composed. The first two philosophers of this well-known and influential School of tantric Śaivism – Somānanda (ca. 900-950 CE) and Utpaladeva (ca. 925-975 CE) – were active at the time of the composition of the MU. John Nemec has argued that these authors intentionally sought to create a new tradition, one that both accepted and transgressed Vedic orthodoxy by relying on texts composed by human authors who gained authority by having attained a state of divine gnosis.[50]

The *Pratyabhijñā* is also a śākta or goddess tradition in which all women are seen as manifestations of the supreme feminine power known as Śākti. Madhu Khanna notes that in the later southern *Tripurāsundarī* tradition, which draws on *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy, all women are worshipped as Śakti, and are therefore ideally treated with deference and respect, regardless of caste, age, status, education or ability.[51] Existing evidence therefore shows that women in śākta traditions held key roles as gurus,[52] initiates, and respected members and leaders of spiritual communities.[53] Further evidence shows that women in medieval Kashmir had legal rights and were educated.[54] In addition, tantric revelation in the Śaiva and Śākta

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50. Nemec, "Innovation and Social Change."

51. Madhu Khanna, "The Goddess-Women Equation in Śākta Tantras," in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, ed. Mandakranta Bose (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 114.

52. Sanderson identifies some female Krama gurus and disciples in his comprehensive essay called "The Śaiva Exegesis," in *Mélanges tantriques à la mémoire d'Hélène Brunner*, ed. Dominic Goodall and André Padoux, (Pondicherry: Institut français d'indologie/École française d'Extrème-Orient, 2007), 263, 265, 275, 277, and 295. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this essay for suggesting this reference.

53. Khanna, "The Goddess-Women Equation," 120.

54. Ray, *Early History*, 114-118. Evidence shows that women in Kashmir likely had property rights and independent legal status; for example, Dāmodaragupta's *Kuṭṭanimata* shows that women were broadly educated with a liberal education in "the sexual sciences of Vātsyāyana, Dattaka, Viṭaputra and Rājaputra, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata, Viśākhila's treatise on art, Dantila's work on music, *vṛkṣāyurveda*, painting, needlework, woodwork, metal work, clay modelling, cookery, and practical training in instrumental music, singing and dancing" (Ray, *Early*

traditions is typically narrated from the mouth of the goddess herself, or by Śiva after having been prompted by a question asked by the goddess who is the *yonīmukha* (the source of knowledge).[55] Likewise, Buddhist tantra – which also emerged in the syncretic religious landscape of medieval Kashmir – notably has women present as initiates and enlightened teachers. Accordingly, within Buddhist tantra spiritual authority is derived from one's state of spiritual attainment rather then one's gender identification.[56] As this collection of evidence establishes, religious traditions in tenth century Kashmir clearly accepted female power and agency on social, religious and political levels. Hence, I suggest that the author of the MU could have been a woman.

The Female Devotional Voice

The most well-known model for female authorship in Medieval North India is that of the wandering female bhakti poet saint. This model of female authorship is the most widely known and accepted by modern Indological scholars.[57] This "female devotional voice"[58] arose out of the phenomenon

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History, 114-118). Biḷhaṇaʼs *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* (ca. 1080 CE) also tells us that some women were fluent in both Sanskrit and Prākṛt; Ray speculates that women in the royal family must have had administrative training to explain the success of female rulers and other documented diplomatic efforts by women.

55. Khanna, "The Goddess-Women Equation," 120.

56. Miranda Shaw notes that the "social marginality and loose organization of the Tantric movement in medieval India enabled women to participate freely in the revelation process. In the absence of formal barriers to their participation, women had the same access to visionary experience and religious authority as men. Women gained religious experience through their practice of meditation and subtle yogas, and they wielded authority on the basis of that experience rather than through ordination or clerical office. As a result of their unrestricted participation, women helped to create Tantric Buddhism, handing down doctrines, rituals, meditations, and yogic practices that remain prominent in the contemporary practice of Nepalese and Tibetan Buddhism" (Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, 102).

57. Scholarship that focuses on other models of female authorship are relatively new. For examples of this type of work, see the essays published in *Cracow Indological Studies* 20, no.2 (2018). I am grateful to Kashi Gomez for directing me to these essays in a Skype conversation (April, 2019). See also Ke Lalita and Susie J. Tharu, eds., *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York: Talman Co, 1991).

58. This is the term used by Kumkum Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti Part I," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 27 (1990): 1464-1475; Sangari, "Mirabai and

of the wandering female bhakti poet saint, which developed in the mid-first millennium CE in south India. Bhakti itself was not foreign to the brahmanical tradition by that time, however, this was a new model of female devotion free from social constraint, one that combined love for god with a yearning for the kind of personal love first expressed in Tamil Akam poetry. This combination created a new language of desire, one directed toward god yet framed as personal love. These female poet saints abandoned social life and transgressed the restrictive norms of caste and family duty in search of god as their divine beloved husband or lord, reciting devotional oral poetry as they went. By the late medieval period, south Indian bhakti poetry reached north India, merging with more traditional types of bhakti to create both dualistic (*saguṇa*) and nondualistic (*nirguṇa*) traditions, and become a genre of devotional poetic expression that could be taken up by either male or female poet saints.

In an essay entitled "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti," Kumkum Sangari calls this shared genre of representation "the female devotional voice," because, regardless of the gender identification of the poet, it involves adopting a woman's social position in relationship to the divine. The female devotional voice thus describes a relationship between god and the devotee modeled on *strīsvabhāva,* the nature of women, and *strīdharma,* women's duty in marriage and society. Sangari notes that *strībhāva* and *strīdharma* are subaltern positions within the wider patriarchal brahmanical social order, in which women are equated with the lowest subaltern caste and have no rights. While it appears on the surface that the position of a female wandering bhakti poet allows a woman to have uncontrolled desire outside of a marital relationship, it is important to note that she only has this freedom because she is focused on a benevolent and compassionate god who will not take advantage of her weakness outside of the home.[59] While at first glance this devotional voice appears to provide women with an outlet for desire beyond a marital relationship – and therefore offer an escape from the restrictive bond of married life – in fact, it is merely that the *strīdharma* and *pativrata* (the vow to a husband) have been turned inward. In other words, the external sacrifice to husband and family becomes an internal

the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti Part II," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 28 (1990): 1537-1552.
59. Sangari, "Mirabai," 1471.

sacrifice to god and devotion.[60] This is exemplified in the figure of Mirabai, who validates the inequality of the patriarchal structure and reinforces the subalterneity of the female subject even as she seems to challenge, escape or ignore limiting patriarchal bonds and institutions.[61] Put differently, the genre of the female devotional voice continues to restrict women to a lower social position in relation to a dominant lord. As Sangari notes, "when a male bhakta uses the female voice, e.g., Kabir, it is only one voice among other available voices – while a woman must sing as a woman."[62] Thus, while "the female voice offers men the possibility of either renouncing or remaking some aspects of their maleness, it does not necessarily offer women escape from their 'femaleness' or from their own bodies and selves as it were."[63]

Sangari's analysis does not acknowledge the possible subject position of a woman who chooses not to sing in the feminine devotional voice as defined above, nor does it acknowledge the possibility that such a women could have adopted a voice that produced something worthy of lasting historical recognition. I suggest that we consider the possibility of an analogous category, that of the "male śāstric voice." Like Sangari's "female devotional voice," the "male śāstric voice" I am imagining would be gender transferrable. While the female devotional voice may be the only voice that historians have thus far been willing to recognize, if we follow the lead of feminist history and Gender Studies scholarship and look past the focus on upper caste Sanskrit brahmanical texts – and, accordingly, past the brahmanical assumption of male dominance in historical authorship – other interpretive avenues open. Perhaps if the author of the MU were female, she would have adopted the male śāstric voice as a genre of expression, because that is what best suits the content and form of her literary message. It makes no sense to imagine that only a man has a choice – to sing as a woman or to compose as a man when it suits his expressive purpose – while a woman has only one choice, and therefore only one imagined expressive purpose, which is to sing as a woman in devotion to her male lord. Sangari notes that Mirabai's bhakti "negotiates the webbed terrain of oral traditions and overlapping patriarchies, but neither finds nor creates an unsullied space.

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60. Sangari, "Mirabai," 1464.
61. Sangari, "Mirabai," 1464.
62. Sangari, "Mirabai," 1539.
63. Sangari, "Mirabai," 1540.

Her bhakti is internally poised to lose the ground it sets out to gain. For us Mira represents a struggle, not a victory."[64]

But the author of the *Mokṣopāya* was not like Mira. Our author did nothing but find and create new and unsullied space. The *Mokṣopāya* breaks new ground in every way. Certainly, a brilliant and spiritually advanced female-sage could have knowingly and intentionally composed a text that broke new philosophical ground while adopting a "male" śāstric authorial voice to do so. Sangari notes that "the combination of the sociality of the female voice, with the signature, whether male or female, implies a personal subject knowingly immersed in an oral collectivity who does not choose to do more than leave a small mark of his/her repetition and innovation on existing expressive modes."[65] In other words, the female devotional voice is not set out for innovation. The female devotional voice seeks to blend in to the tradition, to be meek in front of the divine, and it therefore reinforces patriarchal norms that subjugate women's sexuality to the marital bond. But once again, that is not our author. I argue that this is not the model of authorship the author of the *Mokṣopāya* followed, if she were a woman. Just because the MU is not composed in the female devotional voice of wandering bhakti poet saints – the only female authorial voice recognized by historical scholarship informed by brahmanical patriarchy – does not mean that the author of the *Mokṣopāya* was a male. Let us imagine that powerful women existed beyond the limits of female agency encoded in the textual record of the brahmanical patriarchy, and that such a woman intentionally created a text that also declares itself to be beyond all boundaries.

Conclusion

Who has a voice in Hindu literature? By virtue of their control over authorship in traditional texts, the brahmanical patriarchy has historically sought to control definitions of womanhood while women have been made historically silent.[66] Traditional texts written by men have had the power to define gender norms and to depict women from that vantage point, and

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64. Sangari, "Mirabai," 1551.
65. Sangari, "Mirabai," 1550.
66. Eira Patnaik, "Self Image of Indian Women in Ancient and Medieval Literature," *South Asian Review* 17, no. 14 (1993): 55.

history has accepted this as a true depiction of historical reality. Manu, for example, "allots to women a love of bed, seat, ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and other vices equally reprehensible," and, according to the Ṛgveda, woman is a seductress.[67] However, as Eira Patnaik notes, whether a woman was framed as a goddess or a demon, it was still a male voice that did the framing.[68] So, if a woman were to depict another woman without using the female devotional voice of the bhakti poet saint, without claiming authorship, without adopting female stereotypes created by a patriarchal system that denies her power and agency, we would not know it because our historical categories do not enable such a possibility. This discussion is important, because this scenario is typically not deemed likely or even possible; not because there is evidence to rule it out, but because assumptions and pre-existing expectations guide us to.

Griselda Pollock has rightly noted that there is nothing inherent to femininity that bars women from producing powerful intellectual work.[69] Feminist critical theory asks us to consider not only who has the power to write history, but also by what means and methods it is written.[70] It is not logical to believe that women have merely been passive recipients of philosophical and religious traditions that have denigrated them for thousands of years. But we do not know what a medieval woman's authorship would look like beyond the female devotional voice because we assume it does not exist. However, it is likely that stories have been written by unrecognized women throughout history. How much significant philosophical wisdom has been wrongly attributed to male authorship? Such concerns suggest that we should not be afraid to approach ancient or medieval Indic texts through a feminist lens – there is much to gain and little to loose. For this reason, I argue that we entertain the idea that the author of the *Mokṣopāya* could have been a woman.

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67. Patnaik, "Self Image," 55.

68. Patnaik, "Self Image," 55.

69. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 2008).

70. For examples of this kind of feminist historical recovery, see Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference,* and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).