

December 2004

Fire in the Soul of Zurga: Bizet's The Pearl Fishers and Male Sati

Lori Dabbagh
St. John Fisher College

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dabbagh, Lori (2004) "Fire in the Soul of Zurga: Bizet's The Pearl Fishers and Male Sati," *Verbum*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol2/iss1/10>

This document is posted at <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol2/iss1/10> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

Fire in the Soul of Zurga: Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* and Male Sati

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Although in recent years Georges Bizet's "other" opera, *Les Pêcheurs de perles* (*The Pearl Fishers*), has been performed on occasion, scant attention has been paid to it, compared to his world-renowned masterpiece *Carmen*. Even those who are not avowed opera goers have at least heard of the *Habañera* (*L'amour est un oiseau rebelle*) and more so, the ever-popular *Toreador Song*. Bizet penned *The Pearl Fishers* at age 25, and enthusiasts of this early work praise the "freshness of inspiration" which contributes to its "perennial success." (9). *The Pearl Fishers* takes place on a "wild, arid beach on the island of Ceylon [modern-day Sri Lanka]" (10), where bold divers brave death every year (18). It is a French Orientalist opera, as is *Carmen*, although there is not yet the mezzo-soprano to embody the "exotic" seductress (in the case of *Carmen*, the Andalusian Gypsy). We only have the pure coloratura soprano, the opposite end of the narrow spectrum allotted to female characters who do not come from "our" world. The late Dr. Edward Said bases his main argument on the distinction between "our" world and the inaccessible "Orient": "Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is – and does not merely represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (12)."

Faculty Essay



Fire in the Soul of Zurga:
Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* and Male Sati

by

Dr. Lori Dabbagh

Although in recent years Georges Bizet's "other" opera, *Les Pêcheurs de perles* (*The Pearl Fishers*), has been performed on occasion, scant attention has been paid to it, compared to his world-renowned masterpiece *Carmen*. Even those who are not avowed opera goers have at least heard of the *Habañera* (*L'amour est un oiseau rebelle*) and more so, the ever-popular *Toreador Song*. Bizet penned *The Pearl Fishers* at age 25, and enthusiasts of this early work praise the "freshness of inspiration" which contributes to its "perennial success." (9). *The Pearl Fishers* takes place on a "wild, arid beach on the island of Ceylon [modern-day Sri Lanka]" (10), where bold divers brave death every year (18). It is a French Orientalist opera, as is *Carmen*, although there is not yet the mezzo-soprano to embody the "exotic" seductress (in the case of *Carmen*, the Andalusian Gypsy). We only have the pure coloratura soprano, the opposite end of the narrow spectrum allotted to female characters who do not come from "our" world. The late Dr. Edward Said bases his main argument on the distinction between "our" world and the inaccessible "Orient": "Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is – and does not merely represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (12).

Bizet and his librettists do not set out to accurately represent this "Orient" known as Ceylon, but the esthetic result is both pleasant and compelling. Bizet constantly switched locations for the opera; one of its settings was supposed to be Mexico before he decided on the South Asian island whose inhabitants are ostensibly Hindu. None of the main characters' names are of Hindu or Sinhalese origin. In fact, the High Priest Nourabad's name contains the Arabic word for light, *nur*, while he is ironically a dark force. The soprano Leila's name is Arabic for night, and the bulk of the opera's action

takes place during the night when the religious power of Nourabad and the political rule of the tribal chief Zurga are undermined. Zurga's name might be a variant of the Arabic word for blue, *zurqa* (Moroccan and Gulf Arabic pronunciation would be *zurga*) which connotes water and pearl diving. Finally, the tenor Nadir bears a name which means strange or rare, since his love for Leila is like a rare pearl for which he risks his life. Bizet's librettists might have picked these names for their musicality as well as their meaning, mixing the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent in their effort to create "their Orient."

The booklet which accompanies the recording of the opera directed by Manuel Rosenthal further substantiates the Orientalist idea. The orchestral introduction which introduces all the main themes is described as follows: "We are in Ceylon seen through the eyes of a Parisian composer in the reign of Napoleon III. (9)." The bass baritone Zurga (in French *noir* or dark baritone) is a foil for Nadir, who is described as "a typical French tenor with a high-pitched, fresh voice (9)." Of the two, Zurga is the more "exotic" and he is undone by jealousy (as was the "dark" Othello) and *hubris* or excessive pride (as was Oedipus Rex). He rises to the rank of tribal chief at the beginning of the opera and his downfall is as sudden as the storm which breaks over the Gulf of Mannar, where the real-life pearl fishery is located.

Against the backdrop of the romance between the young huntsman Nadir and Leila, the priestess, Zurga emerges as a tormented soul, doubly betrayed by the friend of his youth and the woman he vowed to give up as a promise to Nadir. Through several changes of heart- cries for vengeance, pleas for forgiveness, outbursts of jealous rage, expressions of remorse- Zurga ultimately sacrifices himself on a fiery altar of his own

making. He “becomes a sati” in a way, whether through the traditional definition of immolation or in the broader sense of self-sacrifice in the name of love and honor.

The Hindu concept of sati always involves female self-sacrifice. The most common interpretation consists of the burning of the widow on her husband’s funeral pyre. Aside from a few isolated cases, men hardly ever “commit sati” (immolate themselves) and never “become a sati” (posthumously ascend to the heights of deification after thus perishing). The seldom-used masculine form of the word is *satu*, plural *sata*. An Indian journalist, Sakuntala Narasimhan, provides a definition of the Sanskrit root word as “a virtuous or chaste woman.” (Foreword). This meaning would apply to the virgin priestess Leila in Bizet’s *The Pearl Fishers*, who pleads with Zurga to spare the life of her beloved Nadir “to help her die” as she alone is burned at the stake. She has sworn to remain veiled and to shun all company except that of the High Priest Nourabad during her ritual blessings of the pearl fishers. Nadir, the young man who loved her many years before, reappears, declares his love for her, and thus violates the sanctity of the grounds where she keeps watch. This “sacrilegious love,” though chaste, is punishable by death.

Narasimhan breaks the word sati down even further and explains,

“The word sati is derived from *sat*, meaning truth, and a sati was a woman who was ‘true to her ideals.’ Since Indian tradition holds chastity, purity and loyalty to the husband (*pativrata*) as the highest ideals for women, there appears to be an inexorable logic behind a decision to give up one’s life on the death of the husband as proof of chastity or the ultimate expression of a wife’s ‘fidelity.’” (11)

This is how the link with ritual widow-burning came about. However, “the original Sati of mythology was not a widow and did not immolate herself on her husband’s pyre.” (11) The wife of Shiva, who forms a trinity with Brahma and Vishnu,

Sati was reduced to ashes after she invoked a “yogic fire” (11) because of a blatant insult to her husband by her father, Daksha. Sati’s father purposely excluded his son-in-law Shiva from a sacrificial ceremony he was officiating, and Sati’s immolation was viewed as an expression of wifely loyalty. Narasimhan asserts that “in the modern interpretation, this has been twisted around into a belief which holds that if a woman gives up her body by burning, like the original Sati, she deserves to be venerated and honoured.” (11)

But not all satis immolate themselves. According to Narasimhan, “Women like Savitri, Arundhati and Anasuya of Indian mythology were all exalted as *pativratas* or paragons of connubial dedication. None of them ‘committed sati’ in the sense in which the word is used now.” (12) A devoted wife in modern India is commonly called a “Sati Savitri” after the woman who convinced the God of Death to spare her husband, and even the wife of Mahatma Gandhi was affectionately dubbed “Sati Kasturba” (12).

Kasturba was so faithful to her husband’s cause of Satyagraha (truth-force) that she followed him to prison several times, eventually dying in a Poona jail on February 22, 1944, after sixty-three years of marriage to him (Wolpert 208). She was married to him when they were both only thirteen. In 1908, during the campaign against the Asiatic Act, which stipulated that all Indians should carry passes in South Africa, Gandhi feared that Kasturba would die in a Johannesburg jail. His “rare letter” to her shows his degree of devotion:

“(. . .) If you keep the courage and take the necessary nutrition, you will recover. If, however, my ill luck so has it that you pass away. . . there would be nothing wrong in your doing so . . . I love you so dearly that even if you are dead, you are alive to me. . . I will not marry again.” (Gandhi, qtd in Wolpert 71)

Not only does Sati Kasturba, who gave her life for the cause of Satyagraha (notice the word *sati*, or truth, at its root), deserve her honorific nickname, but Mahatma Gandhi is unique in his adoration of his wife and his vow as a young man never to remarry.

Narasimhan, a feminist scholar, quotes the Mahatma himself on sati:

“Commenting on a sati incident in 1931, Mahatma Gandhi traced the genesis of self-immolation of wives to male chauvinism. “If the wife has to prove her loyalty and undivided devotion to her husband, so has the husband to prove his allegiance and devotion to his wife. Yet, we have never heard of a husband mounting the funeral pyre of his deceased wife. It may therefore be taken for granted that the practice of the widow immolating herself at the death of the husband had its origins in superstitions, ignorance, and blind egotism of man.” (Gandhi qtd. In Narasimhan, 57)

The Mahatma might have approved of Bizet’s choice of presenting Zurga as a rare male sati, even if he does not sacrifice himself for a spouse. Zurga’s decision to immolate himself in the fire he set (or, in alternate endings, his death by stabbing, even if it is not Zurga who stabs himself) could be regarded as a combination of Hindu sati and Japanese hara-kiri, for Zurga’s vindication of honor is also at stake. As far as his duties as tribal chief are concerned, the High Priest Nourabad condemns him as a traitor for failing to carry out Nadir and Leila’s death sentence. On a personal level, both the friend of his youth and the woman he loved are lost to Zurga. He might have escaped along with the couple he delivered, but by the end of *The Pearl Fishers* Zurga has lost his *raison d’être*. He therefore, as described in the booklet essay by Valencia, which accompanies the 1960 recording, resolves to “run towards death by saving them both” (54).

According to Narasimhan, a woman who was dissuaded from becoming a sati in 1985 is “now worshipped as a ‘living sati’ by the people of the area” (12). Thus, Bizet’s Leila who escaped death but was willing to sacrifice herself for Nadir might be called a

“living sati.” As a child, she hid a fugitive in her family’s hut and calmly refused to divulge his whereabouts, even though several men held her at knifepoint. At the time, she did not know the man was Zurga. So Leila has offered her life for both men on different occasions. Zurga recognizes the necklace she wears as his token of gratitude to the dauntless young girl she once was and in turn delivers her and Nadir.

Even more compelling than the lovers who are redeemed is their savior, Zurga, whose story is as thorny and serpentine as the path by which Leila and Nadir escape. He first meets Leila as a child of about ten or twelve and we can surmise that the next time he sees her as a priestess in the sacred Kandy temple she is a teenager. Zurga obviously does not make the connection between the brave girl who helped him escape mortal danger and the “goddess” both he and Nadir fall in love with during one of their many travels. Leila is now heavily veiled as the Brahmins call the faithful to prayer. Zurga and Nadir catch a furtive glimpse of Leila’s face as she makes her way through the kneeling prayer goers. “*O vision, ô rêve!*” [What a dream-like vision!] (22) is what Zurga exclaims many years later as he and Nadir, on the “wild, arid beach in Ceylon,” recall this moment when the veil lifts. The two men have vowed not to let their mutual infatuation with the priestess tear them apart: “*Soyons unis jusqu’à la mort!*” [Let us remain united until death] (24). Every time Leila appears or is invoked in the opera, as the love objects Zurga and Nedir, the “goddess theme” is heard; the famous tenor-baritone duet “*Au fond du temple saint*” [Deep inside the sacred temple] provides the leitmotiv.

The third time Zurga sees Leila, she is most likely in her mid-twenties and has agreed to live without friends, husband or lover as she sings to protect the pearl fishers

from evil spirits. Zurga has not seen Nadir for several years, and he does not identify Leila because of her veils. Nadir, whose character has been immortalized by the tenor with bell-toned clarity, Nicolai Gedda, in the 1960 recording, boasts of daring life experiences as a huntsman who has tracked down the tiger, the jaguar and the panther. He has also followed Leila's tracks, as well as those of the beasts of the savannah and the forest. Nadir embodies the epithet Sinhalese, or lion-slayer. He appears to have returned to the island out of friendship for Zurga, but he knowingly commits an act of treachery by concealing the fact that he has followed Leila and intending to break the pact with him to whom he has sworn eternal friendship.

After the vessels of the pearl fishers have safely returned to shore, Leila's mission has been carried out and Nourabad plans to leave her in the ruined temple for the night. This is when Nadir scales the cliff and, despite Leila's protests, pledges his love to her. As he tries to escape, Nourabad sends his fakirs after Nadir and rouses the entire village, who interpret the sudden storm and the churning waters as a manifestation of Brahma's wrath. Zurga is prepared to let his friend and the veiled priestess leave, thus overruling Nourabad's injunction that they must be put to death. But when the High Priest tears away Leila's veil, Zurga recognizes her and cries, "Avenge yourselves! Avenge me! May they be cursed!" (44) At his orders, Nadir and Leila are led off separately to await their doom.

As poet Robert Frost might have put it, Zurga's "inner weather" is reflected in the "outer weather": "The storm has subsided and the winds have died down," (46) is how Zurga's recitative begins in Act III. "And like them, my wrath has quieted." In one of the most lyrical arias for baritone, Zurga, alone in his tent, admits the rashness of his act and

pleads for forgiveness (“*pardonnez les transports d’un coeur irrité*”). Horrified at what he has done, he admits that he is the guilty one. He is even prepared to spare Leila as she comes to him and begs for mercy, but she asks him to pardon Nadir, the erstwhile friend who is now his rival. Zurga to flies into a jealous rage: “By believing you can save him, you will lose him forever! (49)” At the top of her vocal register, Leila screams her hatred for Zurga and prepares to die in Nadir’s arms.

What saves both Nadir and Leila is the necklace she gives to a young pearl fisher to bring to her mother after she is dead. Once again regretting his impulsivity, Zurga grabs the necklace from the pearl fisher and declares that he will repay his debt to her. This is when he sets the sacrificial fire and becomes a *satu* like the rare warriors and servants chronicled by Narasimhan:

“On the death of King Ballala in AD 1220, his minister and the general Kuvaralaskhma killed himself along with his wife. In Kashmir, in AD 902 and AD 1081, male servants gave up their lives on the death of the ruler. In Gujarat and Rajasthan likewise, slaves sometimes became *satu*- in 1818 when the maharaja of Jaipur was cremated, eighteen slaves are said to have burned. An attendant of Sawai Jagat Singh also burnt to death on the death of his master in 1819.” (112).

Let us note that Narasimhan has to go back quite far in history to find examples of male self-sacrifice- the most “recent” occurring in 1819- and the ones she mentions happen in the context of the death of a ruler. She asserts that examples of *sata*- “men ending their lives on the death of their wives- are not unknown, though the number is exceedingly small.” (112). But women who commit sati and have temples raised in their honor continue to do so throughout the 1980s, the most publicized case being that of eighteen-year-old Roop Kanwar in 1987. It must be noted that the British outlawed sati in 1829, but a certain “feminine mystique” has been created to incite even modern Hindu

women to burn themselves on their husbands' funeral pyre. Widows are seen as "ill-starred" and a financial burden on the family and they must undergo stringent rituals such as sleeping on the floor and being all but excluded from society. With such a bleak future in store for them, sati might seem the only alternative.

So Zurga's decision to become a *satu* must be foregrounded as an all-encompassing and redemptive instance of male self-sacrifice. He realizes, too late, that he can not decide for Leila whom she may or may not choose as a lover, any more than he can impose Brahma's law of abstinence on her. Leila flouts divine law in the name of love and Nadir is ready as well to defy the outraged pearl fishers who have been stirred into a frenzy by Nourabad. After breaking the chains that bind Leila and Nadir with a hatchet, Zurga pauses and leads the brief trio "*O lumière sainte*" [O holy light] (54) during which he resigns himself to undying love of Nadir and Leila, as well as to his own impending demise. "Only God knows the future," he says as he shows the lovers an escape route known only to him, and they ask him if he will follow.

In some versions of the opera, Zurga leans against an idol of Brahma and burns to death as he watches the terrified Indians escape through the forest with their children in their arms. The 1960 recording of *The Pearl Fishers*, in which Zurga was sung by French baritone Ernest Blanc, as well as the performance conducted by Rosenthal, uses an alternate ending. Alerted by the High Priest Nourabad, four armed Indians stab Zurga in the back, leaving him to die on the "savage coast."

Zurga becomes a *satu* but will have no temple erected in his honor, nor will he be worshipped, because such a "privilege" is reserved for women who cease to live after the deaths of their husbands. But his dying words will remain engraved in the minds of the

listener: “My task has been carried out. I have kept my promise. She lives; he is saved (55).” Slowly suffocating and burning in the fire he has set to allow the lovers to escape, or crawling toward the spot where Nadir and Leila fled as the lifeblood drains out of him, it is only death that will extinguish the fire in the soul of Zurga.

Works Cited

Bizet, Georges. *Les Pêcheurs de perles [The Pearl Fishers]*. Libretto by Carre'

and Cormon. Paris: 1960 and 1988.

Narasimhan, Sakuntala. *Sati: Widow Burning in India*. Doubleday, New York: 1990.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, New York: 1978.

Wolpert, Stanley. *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi*. Oxford University Press, New York: 2001.