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## Intersectionality of Gender, Ethnicity, and Religion Against Political Prisoners the Last Days of Hannah Senesh and Laila Qasim

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### **Abstract**

*Hannah Senesh and Laila Qasim were two political activists, one Jewish and the other Kurdish, whose identities were manipulated by previous regimes in the early and late twentieth centuries: the Nazi and the Iraqi governments. As a result, the narratives of these women have been recounted in terms of historical incidents. In this article, however, we seek to examine the factors behind Senesh and Qasim's imprisonment and death sentences through philosophical lenses and literary theories – intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw), women's identity (Simone de Beauvoir), sexual politics (Kate Millett) and subaltern discourse (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak). We also highlight the theoretical aspects and present the manufactured political ideologies from different ethnic and religious backgrounds that constructed gender identities in the context of these women. Our close reading of these issues shows the existential aspect and also the constructed ideologies that discriminated against women and led to these women being placed behind bars.*

**Keywords:** *Senesh; Qasim; political feminism; subaltern; identity*

### **Introduction**

To Die

To die so young to die no, no, not I.

I love the warm sunny skies,

Light, songs, shining eyes,

I want no wars, no battle cry –

No, no... Not I.

–Hannah Senesh<sup>1</sup>

I'm not frightened although I am a girl, I want to be the first of us to be executed

– Laila Qasim<sup>2</sup>

Hannah Senesh and Laila Qasim wrote and expressed these words in their final days as they

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faced death at the hands of the authorities in two different places and at different times. One might ask, what is the connection between these two young activists? The answer is 'to be a woman'. To illustrate this answer, we investigate these women's experiences in prison through a feminist lens, specifically, through two branches of political feminism:<sup>3</sup> intersectionality and decolonial feminism. The term 'intersectionality' was coined by the American law professor Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. She defines intersectional feminism as 'a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other' (Steinmetz, 2020). This concept points to the complexity of feminism. In other words, it explores the layers of gender issues beneath feminist philosophy and points to the discrimination against women in terms of race, gender, colour, religion, and class. Yuval-Davis (2006: 195) uses the term 'triple oppression' to define intersectionality. She explains this concept through the example of Black women who are oppressed not only as women but also for being Black and working-class. Yuval-Davis (2006: 197) then focuses on identity, stating that it begins when collective narratives and individuals ask, 'Who am I/ or who are we?' Contemporary critics have explored the answer to this puzzle in analytical circles, broadening the identity problem as women are exposed to cultural violence.

Moreover, Yuval-Davis (2006: 198) refers to political power which enforces this 'triple oppression', as Crenshaw explains with the example of Black women. However, cultural traditions tend to be intersectional, and decolonial feminism is concerned with subaltern discourses in the postcolonial world. This branch of feminism focuses on the discrimination and biases women face at the hands of the 'other' sex, especially in the context of colonial power. This movement questions the problems related to the patriarchal system and how genders are constructed politically, historically, and culturally (Salem, 2014). The latter, decolonial feminism, is derived from the concept of colonisation that began with the occupation of the Americas and the Caribbean. In other words, it points to the differentiation between humans and non-humans among Western men. Over time, this distinction shifted and took on various forms. As a result, men and women have been treated as 'different genders' (Lugones, 2010: 743). In the civilised world, including Christianity, the ideological notion of colonisation was imposed and enforced by defining women and their societal position. Therefore, they have been seen as non-human (colonised) by the opposite sex (Lugones, 2010: 744).

It is essential to state that this research centres its attention on these topics through a structured approach, commencing with a concise historical overview of incarcerated women. Subsequently, it presents the biographical accounts of both female figures. Finally, this study offers a philosophical interpretation by means of a comprehensive analysis of the narratives, skilfully integrating relevant theoretical frameworks to furnish readers with its findings.

### **A brief critical review of women in prison**

In general, the subject of women in prison is a significant issue among critics, especially those working in the field of feminism. Fili (2013: 3) notes that theorists of feminist criminology have investigated women's cases in prisons over the years. Women are considered the 'invisible subject' of penology; they have always been socially, politically, and psychologically treated as passive creatures. Like Fili, Richie (2004: 438) asserts that looking at women in prison can provide a clear picture of the reality of gender oppression based on class, race, and gender inequalities (438). Feminist activists such as Angela Davis, Ruthie Gilmore, Julia Sudbury, Juanita Cotto-Diaz and Joy James are prominent scholars who examine prison conditions and the political issues surrounding women in prison (Richie, 2004: 440).

Similarly, Carlen and Worrall (2004: 1) focus on women's incarceration throughout history, noting that this situation takes different forms. The problem is the lack of a particular sub-field of feminist theory investigating the factors leading to their detention. Furthermore, Carlen and Worrall (2004: 4) contend that 'femininity or womanhood' are considered sensitive terms concerning imprisonment, especially in fascist regimes. Women have been treated as men in such cases, regardless of their biological and physiological differences. They have also been insulted and alienated from their identities. The ideology of considering women as inherently different from men shows the concept of 'womanhood', misunderstood by people from other sectors and positions in society.

Carlen and Worrall (2004: 4) then discuss the historical background, asserting that until the seventeenth century – when the Enlightenment changed people's beliefs and ideology – women were sentenced in public as if they were men in various ways, such as 'branding, mutilation and whipping'. In addition, death was protracted through methods such as beheading and burning. In modern times, however, punishments have shifted from one culture to another, always with vengeful and vicious roots. Furthermore, governments constantly seek to increase prison punishment even before the death sentence (Carlen and Worrall, 2004: 4). Pope (2002) also claims that the death sentence has often been a significant source of controversy. Unfortunately, feminist perspectives have been ignored, despite the importance of women's roles in society. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate women's cases before and during their imprisonment.

Yet women often are punished and executed by men. The broader issue in these cases is understanding the significance of womanhood. That is to say, women's voices have been suppressed, and their silence led them to their absence in the criminal justice system (Pope, 2002: 259). Pope then observes that although the judges are primarily men, women are treated and punished like the opposite sex, unaware of the characteristics of their sin or guilt. The quote from Aristotle, the 'giant of Western thought', shows the differences between women and men in society. In other words, since ancient times and throughout history, women have been considered inferior while playing the leading role. Nonetheless, in the criminal justice system, no attention is paid to the importance of womanhood itself (ibid).

### **Hannah Senesh**

The Jewish activist Hannah Senesh (1921–1944) was born in Budapest (Figure 1). After losing her father at an early age, Senesh and her brother were raised by their mother, Katharine (Baumel, 1996: 1). Senesh was influenced by her father, and most of her writings reflected her devotion to their life and her family. She was only six years old when her father died (Kamel, 1989: 46). In addition to her diaries, Senesh also wrote poetry. According to her mother, 'at home [she] was completely involved, and obviously happy, interested in everything that concerned the family.... She managed her time amazingly well, making use of every moment' (as cited in Kamel, 1989: 47).

Katharine seemed shocked that her daughter joined the Zionists<sup>4</sup>, and she feared the consequences. Senesh decided to settle in Palestine to study agriculture rather than pursue an education at a Hungarian university (ibid). The early diaries that Senesh wrote reflected her greatest fear of becoming a 'hopeless Jew', as she wanted to protect her mother from others and resist anti-Semitism. In addition, reading literary texts such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* deepened her concerns about the political changes at that time. Eventually, Senesh's poems were published in a local journal. This motivated her, and she was selected to be a member of

her school's literary society. Nevertheless, she was soon excluded for being Jewish (ibid). At a very young age, Senesh decided to join the Zionist movement.

Eventually, one day in 1939, she followed her heart to enter an agricultural girl's school; she wanted to call herself a Hebrew. During this time, Senesh worked hard and also enjoyed the nature of the shores of Galilee. Soon after, in 1942, during World War II, Senesh was chosen to join Kibbut's Candidates for the Palmach, which belonged to British intelligence. At the beginning of the war, the *Yishuv*<sup>5</sup> leaders requested help from British intelligence. This request was finally accepted, and the plan was based on rescuing RAF pilots in Central and Eastern Europe. This plan was essentially between British intelligence and the Jewish communities in these regions.

Senesh, as a young activist, joined this group, and their mission was a wireless operation – parachuting behind enemy lines. Ultimately, she parachuted into Yugoslavia in 1944 with several other volunteers who had to pose as British officers. This issue became more complicated after the German Nazis revealed the truth behind their disguise – the British would not allow women soldiers behind enemy lines' (523). However, Senesh's enthusiasm made them fearless and encouraged them to continue their mission. Shortly after they crossed the Hungarian border, Senesh was arrested and she was taken to a Budapest prison. In fact, not only Senesh was arrested in prison but also the other two Jewish women – Yoel Palgi and Peretz Goldstein.

Senesh was brutally tortured in prison, forced many times to reveal her name and confess to her secret mission. Later, in the mid-autumn of 1944, she was put on trial and judged by both Hungarian and German authorities. In the meantime, her mother struggled with her attempts to reach the Hungarian authorities to help her daughter. She turned to Israel Kastner, the head of the Committee for Assistance and Rescue. However, her attempts were futile (Ibid, 525). During the trial, Senesh presented her defence and denied being a spy. Although she defended her actions, the judges sentenced her to death for not admitting her guilt. A firing squad sentenced Senesh on the morning of 7 November 1944. Her body was buried in a Budapest cemetery (Ibid, 524). The matter of Senesh and other parachutists was considered *Yishuv*, not a case about the Holocaust. Senesh's poetry fills this gap, expressing local identity and poetic identification with the Holocaust (528).



**Figure 1:** Hannah Szenes (Senesh) Yad Vashem Photo Archive<sup>6</sup>

## Laila Qasim

Laila Qasim was born in Khanaqin (1952–1974) to a Kurdish Faylee family. Her childhood was marked by poverty; her father was a farmer. Laila and her brother Chiyako learned Arabic as their mother taught them. Qasim’s early education began in the same town where she lived. After that, she moved to Erbil and finally to Baghdad, where her life ended in 1974 (Challi, 2011). She studied sociology at Baghdad University (Hussain, 2021). Qasim joined the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in 1970. In the same year, amid the political conflicts in Iraq, particularly in Kurdistan, Qasim and a group of colleagues joined the KDP.<sup>7</sup> The activists included Qasim, her fiancé, Jawad al-Hamawandi, and her friends Nariman Fouad Misty, Azad Suleiman Miran, and Hasan Mohamed Rashid.

They were taken to Abu Ghraib prison in western Baghdad, where they were brutally tortured by the Iraqi authorities, the Ba’ath regime. Qasim and her friends were kept behind bars for a week. Later, they were collectively sentenced to death without any legal trial. Nevertheless, Qasim’s bitter experience in her last days could not have been marked as silence. There is always more to discuss about a woman in prison. Her mother and sister recount what happened there during their visits to the prison. They thought each time would be the last they would see Qasim (*Ark News*, 2019). On their first visit, she asked for a pair of scissors and new clothes. On their second visit, they brought her the items she asked for, and then she cut a strand of her hair and gave it to her sister as a memento. When her sister asked her why she would need the clothing, Qasim replied with a smile: “I will become after a few days (Bride of Kurdistan), therefore, I like to embrace the earth, and I am full of elegance: (Ibid).

On 12 May 1974, Qasim, her fiancé, and their other colleagues were executed. After her imprisonment, it was found that her right eye had been flattened and her body brutally tortured. Qasim’s body was buried in the city of Najaf – in the cemetery of the Valley of Peace (Ibid). She sang the Kurdish song ‘Ey Reqîb’ as she was taken to the gallows. Qasim’s last words were: ‘Kill me! But you must also know that after my death, thousands of Kurds will wake up. I feel proud to sacrifice my life for the freedom of Kurdistan’ (as cited in Bengio, 2016: 41).



**Figure 2:** Historical Kurdish Biographies: Laila Qasim and the Start of a Revolution<sup>8</sup>

## Representations of intersectionality in gender and race

The political experiences of both Senesh and Qasim highlight the reality that women from different religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds were and still are treated identically. Regardless of their racial factors, they were discriminated against and punished by men who barely knew what a woman was. We want to focus on several cases: Senesh was initially rejected to join the British army because ‘the British would not allow women soldiers behind enemy lines’ (Baumel, 1996: 523). This shows that women have always been viewed as inferior and incapable of working beside men. However, Senesh disproved that convention; eventually, she fought with other male soldiers. This evokes Simone de Beauvoir’s (2011: 33) notion of how women socially and culturally are constructed in her book *The Second Sex*, as she states:

Economically, men and women almost form two castes; all things being equal, the former have better jobs, higher wages, and greater chances to succeed than their new female competitors; they occupy many more places in industry, in politics, and so forth, and they hold the most important positions.

From this perspective, women have been constantly deprived of the world outside their front doors. This idea has shaped political doctrine around the world. De Beauvoir presents an existentialist analysis of women’s identity, contending that women should be free to choose the pattern of their own lives. Nevertheless, men’s dominance over women has not allowed them to face life independently and on their terms. The punishments Senesh suffered represent other forms of violence against women in prison. Suzan Beer, a Holocaust survivor, recalls events from the days she met Senesh in prison in 1944: “as they opened the cell door, I saw in the cell across from me a young woman behind bars who was dressed in military fatigues doing vigorous exercises”. She continues:

“I was beaten the night before, defeated, and to see a woman in the cell alone having the strength to exercise in such a place.... She came to the window and smiled”.

According to Beer, when the women met ‘walking together’ in the prison courtyard, ‘she introduced herself, and I saw that her front teeth had been knocked out’.<sup>9</sup> These words once again put male dominance on display in contrast to the invisible power of women. Despite the brutal torment, Senesh stood and could talk and smile – her demeanour implies that she maintained optimism about discovering her identity and attaining freedom in the future. In addition to the physical torture, the Hungarian authorities made another attempt to force Senesh to confess, namely by imprisoning her mother. Consequently, Katharine was taken to prison, where she saw her daughter for the first time after five years. She was ‘initially shocked as they brought in the young woman with bruised eyes and who had lost a front tooth in the torture process’ (Baumel, 1999). Nevertheless, both women decided not to reveal the information the authorities sought. The implications show the depiction of emotional violence against female prisoners where they were also physically tortured. De Beauvoir (2011: 72) asserts:

more instability and less control make them more emotional, which is directly linked to vascular variations: palpitations, redness, and so on; and they are thus subject to convulsive attacks: tears, nervous laughter, and hysterics. Many of these characteristics are due to woman’s subordination to the species.

In other words, women are seen as subordinate – through emotional anxieties, the other sex effortlessly controls them. Therefore, through power relations,<sup>10</sup> emotional torment is exerted

against the victims. On the ideological level, women have been defined as fragile creatures. Senesh's strength contradicts this ideology. As a young fighter, she left her life behind and stood against the Nazis. In contrast to physical violence, she fought and resisted authority. The racial prejudice that was expressed by the Hungarian authorities and the German Nazis against Senesh as a Jew appeared elsewhere and in a different cultural context and time frame.

We would argue that this ideological discrimination ran through history from the 1940s to the 1970s or even later. That is to say, like Senesh, Qasim was imprisoned and cruelly tortured by the Ba'ath regime. Although Qasim was the first woman executed in Iraq, little is known about her or the details of her prison days. The trauma and psychological aspects are hidden as a mystery that cannot be unravelled. Women have been treated savagely behind bars, not only because of political issues but also for the reason they have been considered slaves of the other sex – men – who hold power socially and politically. Hardi (2021: 809) explains that Kurdish women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) have been involved in political resistance since the 1950s, fighting with other activists against fascism and political oppression. They also founded movements and fought for their identity and liberty. Hardi (2021: 809) explains that these women were often called 'Peshmerga (those who face death)'. However, only a few of these women are known, including Laila Qasim (who was hanged for an alleged attempt on Saddam Hussain's life) and Ayshia Qasim Yunis (who joined the Communist party and later was executed in 1988)'. This shows that women's endeavours to live and express themselves freely have been buried with their corpses; their quest for independence and justice has been ignored.

Moreover, they have been treated worse than men by the opposite sex. This philosophical problem is presented in Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. Millett argues (2000: 26) that this fundamental issue is rooted in socially and culturally constructed beliefs: Hannah Arendt has observed that government is upheld by power supported either through consent or imposed through violence. Conditioning to an ideology amounts to the former. Sexual politics obtains consent through the 'socialisation' of both sexes to basic patriarchal polities with regard to temperament, role, and status. As to status, a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in the male, and inferior in the female.

Millett recounts these comments by modern philosopher Hannah Arendt on gender inequality. Social and cultural traditions dominate, muting women's voices and suppressing their existence. Eventually, as de Beauvoir (2011: 20) states, she expands to the matter of identities: 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. To illustrate her words, the question of what a woman is seems like a riddle, and cultural norms give the impression of being the answer. That is, historical, political, and cultural lenses are necessary to define a woman from a feminist perspective. Senesh and Qasim did not call themselves feminists or start feminist movements. They were simply *women* on their own, and they walked alongside their male counterparts to declare their existence on the land that belonged to them. Tragically, they did not live to see their victory, although they became icons of bravery for numerous women who followed them. Millett (2000: 31) also refers to the early stage of children and the way this manufactured belief is produced in their minds. First, parents build gender identity, which is then developed through the children's behaviour.

This conflict appears to be prevalent in people's perceptions of their early childhood. The patriarchal system begins in the family structure, and the rules are set for women when they take on the roles of mothers, daughters, or sisters. Therefore, it seems inappropriate and unacceptable for women to hold political positions, and the punishment worsens when women abandon their domestic world. This points to the main factors that determined Senesh and

Qasim's destinies. The physical and emotional abuses they suffered during their time in prison represent the concept of intersectionality. Specifically, Senesh's story from 1944, at the end of World War II, and Qasim's death in 1974 indicate similar events in two different periods. The political ideologies towards women seem analogous – they were condemned because they were women. One was Jewish and spoke Hebrew, and the other was Kurdish. Both Hitler's and Saddam's regimes regarded members of these ethnic groups as inferior, and according to their doctrine, such races should be eliminated.

The question of identity in the context of intersectionality must be raised: What was the true identity of these women? They were determined by their gender, race, religion, language or natural state of human beings. In this context, race or religion is the key cause for these women's murders at such young ages. They effectively played the role of subalterns, and as subalterns; they did not have the opportunity to present their religious, ethnic, or linguistic identities. This problem is explained by the literary theorist Gayatri Spivak in her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak (1994: 96) defines the subaltern as the inferior community represented by imperialists or colonisers, providing an example of Indian women and culture in the British Empire (96).<sup>11</sup> Spivak (1994: 81) asserts: 'In the First World or the Third, the pure form of consciousness remains an idealistic bedrock which, dismissed as a second-order problem, often earns it the reputation of racism and sexism'.

Spivak's critique shows that this belief is created in individuals' minds when reading Western philosophers and historiography about women. Women's unspoken words against racism and sexism have led to arguments in postcolonial studies. However, in the subaltern context, this becomes particularly sophisticated and profound. According to Spivak (1994: 90), 'if you are poor, black, and female, you get it in three ways' (90). Women thus belong to the 'inferior' race and play the role of the 'slave' who confronts the 'master', gesturing towards decolonial feminism. On the philosophical level, the subaltern's silence reflects the hierarchical system between the coloniser and the subordinate. In other words, the power relationship between these two different groups offers the majority – the authority – the right to represent the minority in terms of culture and identity. Later on, this representation is developed to some extent in its intellectual aspects, as it becomes a creed for historians and historiographical studies. We would like to point out that both women from Hungary and Kurdistan seem to exemplify Spivak's example of the subaltern. On the one hand, Senesh has lost her teeth in the torture process, which implies the concept of silence. But on the other hand, she has to remain silent because she does not admit that the coloniser is superior and that she has broken his rules.

On the other hand, Qasim's eye has been flattened, representing that she is no longer permitted to see the world as she used to do because there is a fascist power that she has disobeyed. However, this is not only about obedience; it is also about the representation of identity in terms of gender and race. These associations show that women are not fragile creatures. On the contrary, they broke the rules set by dictators who attempted to silence the issues raised by women. These female figures are examples of many women from different places who dared to open their front doors. They took the streets and climbed hills and mountains; they flew into the sky to approach the summit of liberation.

## **Conclusion**

This paper presented two female figures, Hannah Senesh and Laila Qasim, as examples of women

in history who were oppressed by fascist authorities. Along with the biographical references, we have argued for other philosophical aspects that are inextricably linked from the perspective of most historians and scholars working in political feminism. The national aspirations of Senesh, a Jewish girl, and Qasim, a young Kurdish woman, were not to destroy fascism but to break its rules and discover the concept of liberty and identity. In our analysis, we have connected the real experiences of the two women with intersectionality and subaltern theories. We have linked the act of gender and racial discrimination to those puzzles that have been questioned and then explored by a number of feminist philosophers such as de Beauvoir, Millett, and Spivak. We have briefly described their theories on femininity and what makes one a woman!

Thus, we have concluded that social norms and traditions simultaneously construct women's identities and the discrimination against them. Therefore, in political terms, men have oppressed women, who have always been central to society and in constitutional positions. The stories of Senesh and Qasim are more than historical narratives. If one were to open the codes, numerous reasons would lead the authorities to blindly torture young women and sentence them to death without standing trial. These women played the role of subalterns, not because they remained silent but because they were murdered under unstable conditions. The existential issues presented thus highlight profound problems that gender raises in the context of politics, religion, and nationalism.

## Limitations

This study has been undertaken within the established theoretical paradigms of literary and philosophical scholarship. The limitations of this research pertain primarily to the paucity of historical and biographical information, particularly concerning the figure, Laila Qasim. Consequently, scholars with an interest in gender and genocide studies are encouraged to transcend these constraints in their future investigations. Moreover, the preponderance of data originates from Kurdish sources, a characteristic that also constitutes a notable limitation of this study. Thus, it is recommended that academics diversify their data collection and attempt to include a broader spectrum of source materials.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation is Senesh and Cohn, *Hannah Senesh: Her Life and Diary*, (New York: Valentine, Mitchell, 1970), p. 300.

<sup>2</sup> This quotation is from the Shafaq website: <https://shafaq.com/en/Report/family-of-the-late-kurdish-revolutionary-leyla-qasim-proposes-reburial-at-kurdistan-museum>

<sup>3</sup> Feminist political theory is a synthesis of feminism and political philosophy that examines how politics is manufactured and the reasons why women's roles and concerns are ignored. Feminist political philosophy seeks to unravel the constitutional world and illuminate historical events. In particular, it examines how women have been represented unsatisfactorily. See more on the Stanford Encyclopedia website: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-political/>

<sup>4</sup> Zionist: A person who belongs to 'Zionism', a Jewish national movement that emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century. This movement was founded to support Jews in Israel. For more information, see the Britannica website: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zionism>.

<sup>5</sup> Yishuv refers to 'the Jewish community in pre-state Palestine'. This political movement included people who lived and held political positions in Israel (Halamish 2009).

<sup>6</sup> The image is taken from Yad Vashem Archives website: <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/through-the-lens/hannah-szenes.asp>.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1970s, the Kurdish Revolution began with the leadership of Mustafa Barazani, and the Kurds fought for their cultural and national liberty. However, the conflicts between the Iraqi government which was led by Saddam Husain, and the Kurds, made Ba'ath regime excessively brutal against the Kurds. This national and political struggle motivated the Kurdish minority of the population to fight for their rights (see the Arknews.net website at <https://www.arknews.net/en/node/9950>).

<sup>8</sup> The image is from Kurdish National Congress of North America website.

<sup>9</sup> Jewish Standard

<sup>10</sup> See Michel Foucault's discussion of power relations and his theorisation of the panopticon in *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak cites the example of Sati and the stereotypical expression 'white men saving brown women from brown men'. She explains that the rituals were represented by colonial discourse, and Indian women were unable to present themselves in either context (see Williams and Chrisman 2013).

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