

**FAZAL SHEIKH, ARTIST-ACTIVIST:
SUBVERTING THE CLICHÉ IN DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY**

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ABSTRACT

Many photographers devote their careers to documenting the lives of impoverished individuals. Despite their talents, photographers often fall into the trap of opening up these individuals to further exploitation. Documentary photographer and artist-activist Fazal Sheikh (b.1965) takes a unique approach to photographing marginalized subjects, with the result that his work preserves the dignity of his subjects regardless of their circumstances. *Seva Dasi*, from Fazal Sheikh's *Moksha* series, c2005, a black-and-white portrait of Seva Dasi, a widow from Vrindavan, India, demonstrates Sheikh's approach; the portrait illustrates both personal and communal experiences through a sequence of photographic and textual juxtapositions. To appreciate the implications of Sheikh's work, including the portrait of Dasi, one must comprehend what photography, particularly in India, has inherited from its colonial beginnings. Documentary photographers who, whether purposefully or unwittingly, employ clichés and exoticisms are following the tradition of Orientalism, a point of view that defines the East in opposition to the West. Sheikh's work, by contrast, confronts Western preconceptions and representations of India. Focusing on the image of Dasi, this essay situates the portrait in the broader framework of Sheikh's artistic endeavors. It investigates the ethics of photographing destitute communities and the impact of colonialism on contemporary photojournalism. Specifically, the essay discusses Sheikh's career and project in Vrindavan; photographs from his *Moksha* series, including *Seva Dasi*; and the political and social implications of photographing the East including the history of Orientalism, colonial photography, and modern-day photojournalism that evokes the exotic.

INTRODUCTION

Photographing individuals in dire circumstances – refugees, famine victims, social outcasts, and the poor – has become a point of moral contention in art and mass media. Many documentary photographers seek change for those they photograph; however, they also struggle with their own intentions and the controversial means by which they might achieve their ends. Moreover, these photographers, especially those who work outside of Europe and the United States, often employ, even though they may not intend to, clichés or Orientalist views in their imagery. The concept of Orientalism, most famously explored by Edward Said, has been present since antiquity, but developed alarmingly during colonialism. Orientalist thought, which sought to exoticize the East in relation to the West, fixed the East in a distant past for the Western colonizer. In India, as well as other former colonies, the legacy of this fixation continues; Euro-American mass media and culture often portrays India as backward, exotic, and unusual.¹ Fazal Sheikh (b.1965), a documentary photographer and artist-activist, has taken a different approach to photographing marginalized subjects, so that Sheikh maintains their dignity regardless of their situation. His photography aims to subvert the clichés associated with the East: "I hope that my work reaches toward a greater good. However, I am not willing to achieve that goal at the expense of the individual."² *Seva Dasi*, from Fazal Sheikh's *Moksha* series, c2005, a black-and-white portrait of Seva Dasi, a widow living in Vrindavan, India, exemplifies this photographic approach; the portrait highlights both individual and collective experiences through a series of photographic and textual juxtapositions.

K. CHRISTIAENS: DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Fazal Sheikh, a professional photographer and activist, was born in New York City in 1965 to an American mother and Kenyan father. He has spent most of his career expanding the concept of documentary photography in refugee and poverty-ridden communities including those of East Africa, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Brazil, Cuba, and India by deliberately merging and juxtaposing photographs with text.³ Sheikh began his photographic aspirations as an undergraduate at Princeton University under sculptor Toshiko Takaezu and photographer Emmet Gowin. At first, he worked on self-portraits to establish a relationship between his self-image and a larger global context. However, after graduation from Princeton in 1987, Sheikh, as a Fulbright fellow, explored documentary photography in Kenya. This trip furthered his desire to explore ways in which photography could communicate the events he witnessed.⁴

Recently, Sheikh's career aspirations have become even more global. In 2000, the artist established the International Human Rights Series (IHRS) to make his work widely available at no cost, through publications, exhibitions, and the internet.⁵ Sheikh's website features his publications of photographic prints and accompanying text. His latest book projects published through the IHRS include *Moksha* (2005) and *Ladli* (2007), which document his recent travels in India photographing dispossessed Vrindavan widows and impoverished young girls and transcribing their stories.

Seva Dasi (Figure 1), from the *Moksha* series, c2005, Fazal Sheikh's black-and-white three-quarter bust portrait of a Vrindavan widow, is one of a series of photographs dedicated to the voices of widows who live in the Hindu spiritual center, Vrindavan. In *Moksha*, Sheikh juxtaposes portraits with text allowing each widow a chance to be heard. While their stories are unique, each widow traveled to Vrindavan to escape the stigma of widowhood and achieve *moksha*, a release from the cycle of reincarnation. The traditional black-and-white portrait, *Seva Dasi*, seems at first glance, just that, traditional. However, after reading the attached text, the viewer understands that Sheikh's subject is a woman compelled to make a pilgrimage to Vrindavan, a town full of such widows rejected by their families and waiting for the release of death.⁶

Unlike other photojournalists who portray maltreated communities as "simply at the mercy of circumstances," Sheikh emphasizes their active endurance. He aims to open a dialogue that will educate his viewers and induce change.⁷ Fazal Sheikh's work challenges Orientalist preconceptions stemming from colonialism and perpetuated by clichéd photographs. His method promotes respect for human rights through complimentary texts and photographs.

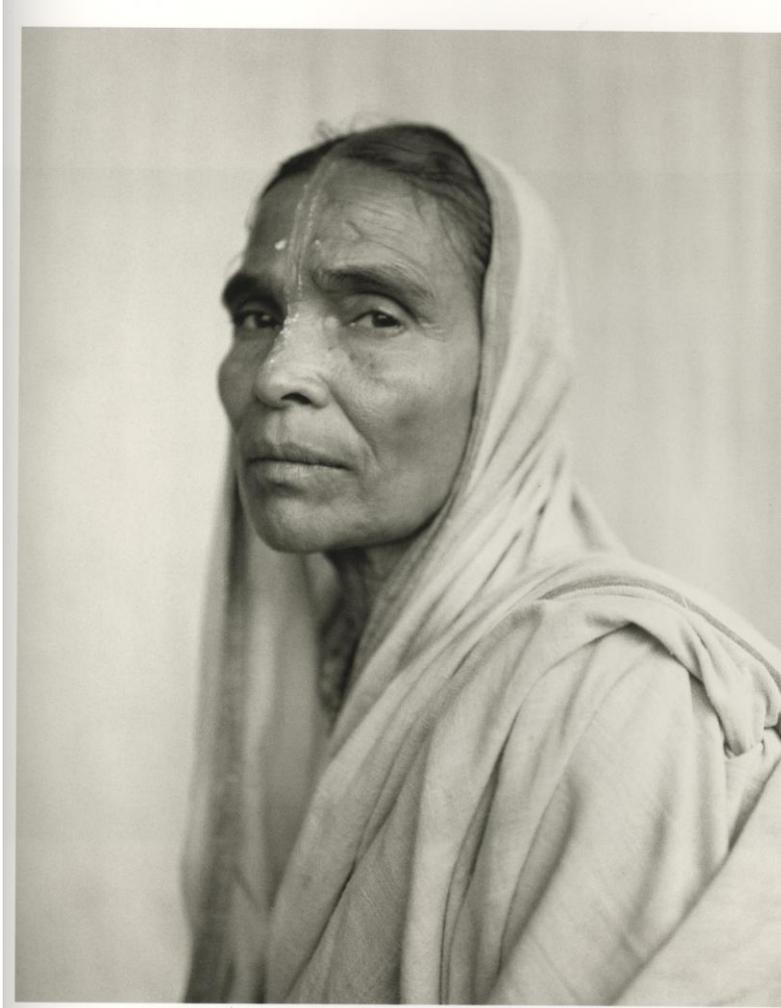


Figure 1

Fazal Sheikh, *Seva Dasi*, from *Moksha* series, c2005

Focusing on the image of *Seva Dasi*, this essay places the portrait in the broader context of Sheikh's work and explores the ethics of photographing these women and the impact of colonialism on present-day photojournalism.

THE MOKSHA PROJECT AND WIDOWHOOD IN VRINDAVAN

Fazal Sheikh's photographic project, *Moksha* (completed c2005), which includes the portrait of *Seva Dasi*, documents life in Vrindavan and the stories of many of the widows and other women without spouses residing there. The women pray to the Hindu god Krishna for release from the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*). The state of *moksha* releases one from the affliction of reincarnation and mortal life; by permitting absorption into the universal soul and the loss of one's individual, mortal identity.⁸ Many widows, such as *Seva Dasi*, were forced from their homes or left feeling like a burden and came to Vrindavan to find shelter and a place where they belong. Other women were rejected by their husbands or vowed never to marry. For example, Renuka was raped by a neighbor and rejected by her husband as defiled.⁹ Jayanti Kumari escaped her rapist when she was an unmarried seventeen-year-old; she has since decided never to marry and came to Vrindavan to belong to a community of women.¹⁰ Each woman in Sheikh's *Moksha* provides a different story, but all describe the gross inequality that women face in Indian society.

Vrindavan is located in Uttar Pradesh, about 151 kilometers south of Delhi, and is considered one of the most sacred places in India. Home to over four thousand temples and shrines, largely dedicated to

the Hindu god Krishna, Vrindavan was recognized as a holy site in the 16th century when Chaitanya Mahaprababh, a Bengali sage, had a vision of that city, the childhood refuge of Krishna. As Vrindavan became a holy pilgrimage site, it also became a sanctuary for thousands of homeless widows who worship Krishna as both god and husband who might provide them with *moksha*. In return for singing in the temples, Vrindavan provides the widows with a relatively safe haven, a meager supply of food, and a community of sympathetic women.¹¹

Mathura, the town closest to Vrindavan, is the birthplace of Krishna, the most human incarnation of Vishnu, “the preserver and the maintainer of the established order,” who supervises behavior, encouraging followers to avoid extremes and maintain moderation.¹² Vishnu has ten incarnations, or *dashavataras*: Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalki.¹³ Krishna is one of the most extensively worshiped incarnations of Vishnu; many of his followers count him as separate from Vishnu, a supreme god without equal.¹⁴ Artwork across India portrays Krishna flirting with the *gopis*, milkmaids residing in the area along the Yumuna River. In Vrindavan, Krishna met Radha, a *gopi* Krishna took as his lover. The adult Krishna moved from his childhood homes of Mathura and Vrindavan to become the great princely hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*. In Vrindavan, worshipers, including widows, follow the younger Krishna hoping to win his love and *moksha*.¹⁵ Hindus believe in reincarnation – that *karma* (one’s actions in past and present lives) decides one’s future actions and, ultimately, one’s reincarnated state. The cycle of reincarnation is called *samsara*; *moksha* releases one from the suffering of *samsara*. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna promises that meditating on him at the point of death will grant the devout *moksha*.¹⁶ Therefore, Indian widows, waiting for death and release from the scorn of widowhood, sing and pray to Krishna in the hopes of achieving *moksha*.

The dispossession of widows in India stems from a stigma attached to widowhood based on the perceived threat of such women. According to the *Skanda Purana*, a Hindu text,

The widow is more inauspicious than all other inauspicious things...At the site of a widow, no success can be had in any undertaking; excepting one’s mother, all widows are void of auspiciousness. A wise man should avoid even her blessings like the poison of a snake.¹⁷

Hindu society blames widows for the deaths of their husbands, assuming that they are being punished for crimes committed in a previous incarnation or because they were not loyal to husband and family. Therefore, widows generally cannot remarry lest they bring misfortune upon their new husbands.¹⁸ When a woman is widowed young, she becomes a burden to her in-laws who must financially provide for her. These in-laws often seek to intimidate the young widow, forcing her to move out of her husband’s house.¹⁹

Since India achieved independence in 1947, the government has passed new inheritance laws that give widows rights to a portion of their husbands’ property as well as a small widows’ pension. However, women remain largely under the control of male relatives who circumvent these laws. Additionally, many women are not educated and do not know their rights under Indian law.²⁰ Reform movements to educate women and encourage economic independence have highlighted the plight of widows in Indian society and gained public support. Despite these efforts, many women remain subservient and exploited.²¹

Widows in Hindu Indian society often are treated as goddesses or the slaves. Many are sold by their in-laws into prostitution. Although outlawed in the nineteenth century, the practice of *sati* is sometimes forced on widows. Interpretations of *sati* vary; some believe that widows should burn themselves on their husbands’ pyre out of grief, while others think the act elevates them to goddesses. Widow burning is said to free her from her previous sins.²² Moreover, *sati* provides her husband’s family with the widow’s property.²³ Subject to many restrictions and constant disapproval, the widow must remove any indicators of marriage – glass wedding bangles, the *tali* (wedding necklace), and the *kumkum* (red dot on the forehead). She must also wear white for the remainder of her life, never adorn herself with cosmetics or the vermilion mark in the parting of her hair, and eat a vegetarian diet without spices that might induce sexual passion.²⁴ Many widows are evicted from their homes (owned by their in-laws or their children), or they decide to leave in order to avoid becoming a burden. They move to holy places such as Vrindavan to await death and the possible release of *moksha* through prayer and penance.

In Vrindavan, women find solace in a community of about 5,000 (of the 40 million in India) widows suffering the same plight. They live alone, and many no longer see their families. Many have no savings and live on handouts of rice and lentils and a stipend of two rupees if they chant *bhajans*, devotional songs, in the temples; although these are often not provided daily. Some can afford housing in one of the many *ashrams*, while others live under stairwells or in crude shelters. Widows under fifty are often forced into sex with landlords, rickshaw drivers, policemen, Hindu holy men, or sold into prostitution in nearby Delhi. HelpAge India, a medical organization, arrives once a week with a mobile clinic. Widows are treated for malnutrition, breathing difficulties, infections, fevers, stomach disorders, and various other ailments.²⁵

SEVA DASI AND THE MOKSHA SERIES

Fazal Sheikh provides personal and historical contexts through his photographic portraits, by placing the widows' own words adjacent to his images. The portraits are further contextualized by photographs depicting the physical setting and spirituality of the women. These contextualizations frame how we see the formal visual qualities of *Seva Dasi* as well as the other portraits in the series. Fazal Sheikh utilizes the formal and traditional medium of black-and-white photography to portray each subject with dignity. For example, the black-and-white nature of the photograph, *Seva Dasi*, as well as its simple, focused composition asks the viewer to focus on the subject's face rather than the neutral background or her white draped clothing. The simplicity of the composition – the subject is presented almost directly in the center surrounded by negative space – keeps the viewer's attention on the woman's staring eyes, set mouth, and weathered skin. The angle is straight-on as she turns in a three-quarter pose. She is so close to the picture plane that we can see the folds of her clothing cut off by the edge. Thus, she is presented as the subject without distractions. The focus and lighting combine to form a detailed portrait of the left side of Seva Dasi's face, while the right side, turning away, becomes softer and cast in shadow. However, the contrast is not stark. The tonal range of the photograph neither emphasizes nor deemphasizes light and dark tones; this provides the photograph with a natural and unaltered appearance. Because of the photograph's intimacy, Seva Dasi's pose seems staged by Shiekh; however, this only makes the photograph more personal because of the relationship between subject and photographer (and, by extension, subject and viewer). The complete lack of detail in the background allows the woman and the text to tell her story. The viewer is able to comprehend her suffering and acceptance – her solitariness in a supposed community of widows increases the viewer's perception of her individuality and loneliness. Shiekh seems true to his subject in both formal qualities and in the personal story he conveys.

The portrait of Seva Dasi expresses resignation rather than suffering. The woman, sitting for the photographer and looking openly into the camera, is honest and unashamed. She appears neither happy nor despairing; rather, the lines of her face and the set of her mouth reveal the life experiences that have led her to Vrindavan. Because Sheikh recognized that her story could not be told through this portrait alone, he included text to enhance her individuality in the village of women.

Seva Dasi's account of life after her husband's death provides insight into the scorn and poverty that many widows face before and during their stay in Vrindavan: "For three years I lived with my youngest daughter and her husband, and then my son-in-law told me I had to leave, he would not take responsibility for me anymore." Seva Dasi, who had to beg to afford her daughters' marriages, was evicted from one son-in-law's home after three years. Seva Dasi came to Vrindavan in search of a community and a life of devotion; she used to visit her daughters, but no longer wishes to be a burden to them. Dreaming of her dead son and of what life might have been like if he had lived, she now devotes her life to the Hindu god Krishna and prays for the release of her soul from the cycle of reincarnation.²⁶ Her life mirrors that of the other widows residing in Vrindavan – a combination of rejection by family and society and the guilt of burdening her family.

Seva Dasi represents one type of portrait that Sheikh includes in his *Moksha* series. While some women revealed their faces to the camera, others showed their backs or profiles. Sheikh respects the rights of his sitters to choose their own photographic representation. For example, his portrait of Neela Dey (Figure 2), from the *Moksha* series, c2005, shows only the woman's sari-clad profile as she turns away from the camera lens. However, Sheikh portrays Neela Dey's figure with the same dignity and

meticulous detail as his portrait of Seva Dasi. He uses light and shadow to portray the gradations of lights and darks across the sari surface and differentiates the cloth from the background. Sheikh provides the text of Neela Dey's narrative which tells a similar story of familial rejection.²⁷ Moreover, she provides insight into the devotional lives of Vrindavan widows:

In Vrindavan we are so determined in our devotion that everything else in the world is dead to us. We ourselves are dead and living with Krishna. Sometimes Krishna comes to me while I am sleeping and takes my sari and touches me or plays with me. I see him clearly and I want only to talk to him, only to see him. I can go to the Yamuna as often as I please and bathe with his spirit. I never dream about my family. I am seventy years old and all I want now is *moksha* and freedom from this cycle of death and rebirth that has caused me such pain.²⁸



Figure 2

Fazal Sheikh, Neela Dey, from *Moksha* series, c2005.

Neela Dey exemplifies how widows immerse themselves in religion in order to escape their marginalization by Indian society. The text illuminates Neela Dey's ambiguous portrait; indeed, it is essential to the viewer's understanding of her character.

In addition to Sheikh's portraits and text, the *Moksha* series provides context through photographs of Vrindavan itself. Sheikh captures Vrindavan's streets in the morning when the widows walk to ashrams to sing (Figure 3); monkeys (and other animals); architectural elements (Figure 4); and birds in various poses, including those in flight (Figure 5). The photographs of the streets provide glimpses of the widows' daily lives. Photographs of Vrindavan monkeys comment on the solitary and collective lives of the widows. Some feature one monkey, while others portray a few monkeys huddled together. Each widow has her own unique history, but the widows are collectively marginalized, worship together, and depend on each other's support. Similarly, photographs of birds symbolize the widows' spirituality. Images include birds with broken wings or those that are sectioned off. The birds in flight are a meditation on the concept of *moksha*, or a release from the cycle of mortal suffering through religious practice and devotion to Krishna. Indeed, these photographs provide not only context, but commentary on the widows' experience. Through the portraits, text, and contextual photographs in the *Moksha* series, Sheikh presents a comprehensive narrative of widowhood in Vrindavan.



Figure 3

Fazal Sheikh, *Untitled*, from *Moksha* series, c2005.



Figure 4

Fazal Sheikh, *Untitled*, from *Moksha* series, c2005.



Figure 5

Fazal Sheikh, *Untitled*, from *Moksha* series, c2005

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF PHOTOJOURNALISM IN INDIA

To appreciate the significance of Sheikh's work one must comprehend what photography, particularly in India, has inherited from its colonial beginnings. Documentary photographers who, whether purposefully or unintentionally, use clichés or exoticisms are drawing on the tradition of Orientalism, a specific way of contrasting the East with the West. The Orient, referring to Asia (although the concept of Orientalism has since been applied to former colonies outside of Asia), was a European invention consisting of, as Edward Said explained, "romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." The Orient became a concept, in addition to a location, that could be contrasted with the supposed progress of Europe; as the world became smaller during the Early Modern Period, the Orient became less mysterious. The exoticism remained, but was considered backward, static, and the people, savage.²⁹ By roughly the late eighteenth century, colonial discourse adopted Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."³⁰ Orientalism has become ingrained in the Western psyche; it is associated with "traditional learning (the classics, the Bible, philology), public institutions (governments, trading companies, geographical societies, universities), and generically determined writing (travel books, books of exploration, fantasy, exotic description)."³¹ For the "West," or those operating in realms of Western discourse, it has become difficult to talk about the "East" without encountering the discourse of Orientalism. During the colonial period in India photography was used to survey architecture, landscape, and indigenous populations; these photographs were executed in a manner that reflected Western Orientalist dogma. Contemporary documentary photographers struggle with the legacy of this photographic history; similarly, they must confront their own preconceived notions of Orientalism.

In the case of present-day India, political and social disputes may be traced back to the legacy left by British imperialism; religious, political, economic, and social issues came to a head at the time of Indian independence and partition. British colonialists united India under the Raj (the term for British-controlled India) through a system of manufactured divisions that focused on religious and class (and by extension, caste) differences.³² One of the most prolific examples of colonial imperialism and Orientalism

mediated through photography is the *People of India* series, published in eight volumes between 1868 and 1875 by the India Museum in London (edited by John Forbes Watson and John William Kaye). It contained about five hundred photographs and accompanying text that fostered British control of the subcontinent through meticulous characterization and labeling of Indian “types” based on their “political reliability and loyalty, criminal tendencies, and amenability to progress and education.”³³ For example, the *Portrait of a Young Woman*, from the *People of India* series, exoticizes and strips bare (literally and figuratively) an Indian woman from Eastern Bengal for the Western viewer. The focus on the young woman and her nudity allows the Western colonizer to dominate her through possession – the camera lens captures her exposed breasts and puts them on display. Similarly, the photograph exemplifies the concept of “unveiling” the “Oriental” woman, who holds a heavily draped cloth, but does nothing to cover her most intimate parts. The positioning of the young woman implies the action of disrobing – she attempts to draw the cloth across her torso. Additionally, the viewer is able voyeuristically to gape at the young woman without being fully confronted by her gaze; she looks down to the side, allowing the viewer to disconnect the woman’s anatomy from her individual identity. Colonial photographers, under the pretext of anthropologically surveying India, were able to enact a system of domination through the use of specific poses. The classification, and exploitation, of Indian “types” permitted British colonialists to present the face of a strong British imperial authority.

Orientalist thought did not end with the collapse of British colonialism. As John Falconer explains, it “relies heavily on Brahmanical discourse about caste...that provides a negative counterimage for the self-perception of the ‘enlightened’ West. It is a discourse that legitimates colonial rule, [and]...continues to exert a considerable influence on the sociological understanding of India after Independence.”³⁴ Therefore, Orientalism presents a Western-constructed reality for India even after Independence. According to Paul Sternberger,

Images of dynamic public rituals, robed holy men and pilgrims, picturesque villagers, teeming city streets, and prostitutes and beggars dominate touristic collections of photographs in popular books and magazines about the country. These clichés shape much of the West’s photographic understanding and expectations of India and exotify and marginalize Indian subjects.³⁵

An illustrious example of the clichéd “Oriental” is *Afghan Girl* by Steve McCurry (b. 1950); first published on the cover of *National Geographic* in 1985, it is one of the most widely-known photographs worldwide. Steve McCurry, born in Philadelphia and a graduate of the College of Arts and Architecture at Pennsylvania State University in 1974, is an internationally recognized photojournalist. He established his career in 1985 when he crossed into Afghanistan from Pakistan just before the Soviet invasion in order to photograph the conflict. McCurry was able to smuggle out his work by sewing rolls of film into his clothing; his coverage of the conflict was one of the first to be published. His most well-known photograph is from this coverage; *Afghan Girl* shows a young Afghan girl in a refugee camp in Pakistan, displaced by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.³⁶

Afghan Girl is a portrait of a young woman looking over her right shoulder and staring directly into the camera lens. With the exception of holes worn in the wrap covering her hair, the portrait yields no suggestion of her identity or social status. Upon first glance, some may argue that McCurry’s *Afghan Girl* utilizes similar photographic techniques to Fazal Sheikh’s *Seva Dasi*. However, upon closer inspection striking differences become apparent: McCurry’s portrait has the quality of a snapshot, while Sheikh’s is more formalized and utilizes a shallow depth of field; McCurry takes a beautiful portrait of a young girl, offering her body up to Western media (typical of Orientalist photography), while Sheikh takes a beautiful portrait of a much older woman; and, most importantly, McCurry strips the Afghan girl of her identity by offering no name or context while Sheikh provides *Seva Dasi* with a name and the autonomy to tell her own story. Additionally, *Afghan Girl*’s withdrawn demeanor and the thin set of her mouth suggest a semblance of resistance. She faces the photographer and turns her body away from him. However, the girl’s eyes capture the viewer’s attention. Their bright green color complements the green fabric visible beneath the holes of her contrasting red wrap.³⁷ Although the girl’s portrait is striking, it tells us very little about her circumstances; therefore, the viewer must look to the caption for additional

information. On the cover of the 1985 issue of *National Geographic* it reads, “Haunted eyes tell of an Afghan refugee’s fears,” forcing an interpretation on McCurry’s portrait. It labels her as fearful and represents her as a typical Afghan refugee – a victim of circumstances. *National Geographic* encouraged the iconic and ambiguous portrayal of this young girl. The article within the magazine makes no mention of her name or role in the Afghan border experience. Her body is offered up for popular consumption, while her personal identity is forfeited.³⁸

The exoticized figure of *Afghan Girl* places the image in the legacy of Orientalist and colonial discourse. Additionally, this image has been repeatedly commoditized through reproductions in various publications including art books, calendars, advertisements, and postcards. As Holly Edwards has argued, these reproductions allow the Western philanthropist to acquire “evidence of contact with other cultures” and the photograph “becomes the trophy, the treasured possession, the evidence of (Christian) charity.” Rather than bringing the viewer closer to the Afghan girl the photograph provides him or her with a sense of cosmopolitanism that creates a certain distance between viewer and subject.³⁹

This legacy of clichés poses a challenge for contemporary photographers working in India, which they must acknowledge before aspiring to undermine them in original work. Dayanita Singh (b.1961), Indian photographer and Fazal Sheikh’s contemporary, comments on the exoticism of India:

I get furious when foreign photographers reduce India to blobs of color and exotica. But photographers who work longer and are more specific in what they are seeking have amazing bodies of work....It’s the fly-by-night photographers who succumb to that superficial vision of India all in color and chaos. I do not mean this for foreign photographers alone; we in India do this ourselves.⁴⁰

Mass media and documentary photographers tend to succumb to superficial depictions of India. By doing so, the photography continues the discourse of colonialism, Orientalism, and clichés. However, there are photographers, activists, and art historians who, like Sheikh and Singh, challenge these trends of visual culture. For example, the ongoing exhibition-project *Imaging Famine* seeks to critique the photographic history of picturing famine and the moral implications of this history. The project began with an exhibition from August to September 2005 in London’s *Guardian* and *Observer* Archive and Visitor Centre, which highlighted popular images of famine and posed key questions.⁴¹ One image, taken by Paul Lowe in Somalia in 1992, depicts the way in which photojournalists crowd around a boy affected by famine and take several close-up shots. The boy stands vulnerable and alone, separated from any sense of community. He is bare-chested and bends his arm to display the product of his starvation – the bone almost visible beneath a too-thin layer of flesh. Similar to the *Portrait of a Young Woman* and *Afghan Girl*, the Somalian boy has the potential to become a universal emblem of famine by losing his individual identity and context. The boy’s image will most likely become a never-recovering, perpetually-dying symbol of “exotic” and “unconventional” Africa. *Imaging Famine* uses this photograph (and others) to pose thought provoking questions about photography. For example:

Charity appeals are organized around often stereotypical images of victims. These appeals raise millions of pounds, thereby demonstrating the continuing power of the pictures. But are these short term benefits offset by the long-term effects of reproducing images with cultural and racial stereotypes?⁴²

Through clichéd images, photographers glean donors who may help alleviate the dire circumstances of people experiencing famine, poverty, or marginalization. Yet, these clichés further marginalize these “victims” by separating them from their Western donors, which is especially detrimental in an expanding global economy. However, even if photographers acknowledge the prevalence of these cultural and racial stereotypes that perpetuate orientalist ideology, the nature of photojournalism may prevent the mainstream professional photographer from challenging these clichés. *Imaging Famine* asks:

Tight competition means tight budgets. It is rare to send photographers for months to document an ongoing crisis particularly in a place unfamiliar to those who control the commissions. Can a photographer be expected to reflect on the complexity of an issue they have only been introduced to the day before – or do they just invoke the stock concerns of those who dispatched them?⁴³

Many photographers are unable to immerse themselves in their projects and therefore cannot reflect a deeper level of understanding. The purpose and principles of contemporary photojournalism must change on all levels – organizations, publishers, photographers, and viewers.

By contrast, Fazal Sheikh, in recognizing these photographic trends, attempts to undermine exoticism and clichés. Sheikh exemplifies the photographer in Singh's description who works longer exploring and understanding a location and its people before photographing. In his coverage of Somali refugees on the Kenyan border, Sheikh revisited families several times in order to understand the complexities of the refugee experience. Other photojournalists with whom Sheikh traveled began photographing immediately and soon left; his travel companions knew the photographic type preferred by Western consumers. However, Sheikh took time to meet members of the community before taking photographs. He then returned eight years later looking for the children he had photographed previously in order to "[give] the sense that the children were in desperate condition but also that they often survived that moment in their lives."⁴⁴ In this instance, Sheikh directly subverts the preconception of the East as static, forcing the viewer to acknowledge that his subjects grow and change.

CONCLUSION

Similarly, Sheikh respects the authority of the leaders or elders of the community; he maintains a policy of first seeking the established leaders' permission to photograph.⁴⁵ Thus, Sheikh asks for the consent of his subjects and creates a communal photographic experience through the use of Polaroids as a point of reference before finalizing individual poses.⁴⁶ Sheikh uses this technique in the *Moksha* series, recording his own impressions as well as the testimonies of the Vrindavan widows. The artist complements these texts with his images in order to provide both the subject and viewer with a context and voice. The collective images convey a communal experience of marginalization within Indian society while the testimonials allow the subject individuality. That reveals the social complexity and undermines the tendency to exoticize the subjects. Sheikh argues "that photographs do some things wonderfully, but in this area, with this sort of political and social turbulence, they don't in my estimation at least, tell the full story."⁴⁷ Sheikh's union of collective and individual experience assists the viewer in discovering that narrative. Sheikh acknowledges the legacy of Orientalist ideology while seeking to subvert these cultural clichés through the marriage of photograph and text that provides an individuality and identity to his subjects.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 208.
- ² Ken Light, *Witness in our time: working lives of documentary photographers*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 159.
- ³ Fazal Sheikh, "Fazal Sheikh," n.d., <<http://www.fazalsheikh.org/>> (3 February 2009).
- ⁴ Ann Landi, "Unsentimental Journey," *ARTnews* 106 (2007): 138.
- ⁵ Sheikh, <<http://www.fazalsheikh.org/>>.
- ⁶ Fazal Sheikh, Seva Dasi (text), from *Moksha* series, c2005.
- "My husband was a carpenter who made very little money. We had three daughters and a son together and then, after thirteen years of marriage, my husband died. Our second son was born soon after my husband's death, but he died when he was a teenager. I had to beg for money for my daughters' marriages. I dealt with all the arrangements for the weddings, but I couldn't afford their dowries, so I was lucky that their husbands' families agreed to take them without any payment. For three years I lived with my youngest daughter and her husband, and then my son-in-law told me I had to leave, he would not take responsibility for me anymore. My daughter didn't want me to go, but what could she do? It was his home, and she had no say in the decision. So five years ago I came to Vrindavan. I used to visit my daughters once a year, but now I don't want to see them. I am satisfied that I have done my duty well, and though I miss them, I don't want to be a burden to them.
- In my dreams my son comes to me and tells me he wanted to live in this world but God would not give him permission. I don't want to dream of him again because the pain of his loss was too great. No one can understand what is in my heart. I pray that after my death I will meet my husband and son once again."
- ⁷ Landi, 139.
- ⁸ Fazal Sheikh, *Moksha* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005), 5.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 68.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 172.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, 258.
- ¹² Jeremy Seabrook, "Ghosts in the city of widows," *Newstatesman* (December 2002): 56. Sheikh, 258.
- ¹³ Richard T. Blurton. *Hindu Art*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): 111-112.
- ¹⁴ Blurton, 132.
- ¹⁵ Alex Chadwick, "Vrindavan, India." *National Geographic* 208 (Nov 2005): 3.

¹⁶ Sheikh, *Moksha*: 5.

¹⁷ Ibid, 259.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ John F. Burns, "Once Widowed in India, Twice Scorned," *The New York Times* (29 March 1998): 1.

²⁰ Burns, 1.

²¹ Pramila Dandvate, et al., *Widows, Abandoned and Destitute Women in India* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1989), 88.

²² Sheikh, *Moksha*: 259.

²³ Pramila Dandvate, et al. 88. For more information on *sati*, see: Pramila Dandvate, et al, *Widows, Abandoned and Destitute Women in India* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1989.)

²⁴ Sheikh, *Moksha*: 260.

²⁵ Burns, 1.

Seabrook, 56.

²⁶ Sheikh, *Moksha*, 202.

²⁷ Fazal Sheikh, Neela Dey (text), from *Moksha* series, c2005.

"I was lucky in my marriage. My husband and his mother always treated me with kindness. We raised two sons and saw both of them married while we lived together contentedly for forty years. But after my husband died, my elder son informed me that I could live anywhere I wanted – in fact he was telling me to leave the house. His wife disliked me and wanted me out of the way. I understood I had become a burden to my son and it was best to go. I left at once, taking nothing with me, aware that I might never see any of them again. I did go back, a few months later, but they asked me what I was doing there and the message was clear: I should stay away.

In Vrindavan we are so determined in our devotion that everything else in the world is dead to us. We ourselves are dead and living with Krishna. Sometimes Krishna comes to me while I am sleeping and takes my sari and touches me or plays with me. I see him clearly and I want only to talk to him, only to see him. I can go to the Yamuna as often as I please and bathe with his spirit. I never dream about my family.

I am seventy years old and all I want now is *moksha* and freedom from this cycle of death and rebirth that has caused me such pain."

²⁸ Sheikh, *Moksha*.

²⁹ Said, 1-2.

³⁰ Ibid, 3.

³¹ Ibid, 202. For more information on *Orientalism* see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

³² Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, ed., *Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament: perspectives on South Asia*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 3.

³³ John Falconer. "A Passion for Documentation: Architecture and Ethnography." In *India through the lens: Photography 1840-1911*. Vidya Dehejia, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in association with Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, 2000) 80.

³⁴ Ibid, 23.

³⁵ Paul Sternberger, "Clouding the Mirror: Trends in Recent Indian Photography and Video," *India Public Places/Private Spaces: Contemporary Photography and Video Art*, Gayatri Sinha and Paul Sternberger, eds., (The Newark Museum and Marg Publications, 2007), 32.

³⁶ McCurry, Steve. "Steve McCurry." n.d. <<http://www.stevemccurry.com/>> (20 April 2009).

³⁷ Holly Edwards. "Cover to Cover: The Life Cycle of an Image in Contemporary Visual Culture." In *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*. Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, Erina Duggane, eds. (Chicago: Williams College Museum of Art and University of Chicago Press, 2007): 79.

³⁸ Ibid, 81.

³⁹ Ibid, 87.

⁴⁰ Light, 151-152.

⁴¹ *Imaging Famine*. Exhibition Catalog. (London: The Guardian, 2005).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Tate Modern.

⁴⁵ *Light*, 155.

⁴⁶ Tate Modern.

⁴⁷ Tate Modern.