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# Symbolism, Empire, and the Dance: On Sarojini Naidu's 'Eastern Dancers' and Arthur Symons's 'Javanese Dancers'[1]

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Born and raised in Hyderabad, Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) is largely known for her role in the Indian independence movement and her tenure as the President of the Indian National Congress in 1925. Yet, in her lifetime, she also developed a rich literary career and published multiple Anglophone poetry collections. She began writing in her childhood, composing '1300-line poems when she had barely entered her teens'.[2] It was when her father arranged for her to study abroad at Cambridge and London in 1896, however, that Naidu encountered Arthur Symons and the British decadent community for the first time through Edmund Gosse, one of her teachers at Cambridge.

An Orientalist dynamic undergirded Naidu's connection to Gosse, but her friendship with Symons was, as Makarand Paranjape observes, 'more honest and equal [...] genuine and intimate.'[3] Viewing Naidu's relationship to Symons in this way might seem surprising given their age gap and his exoticizing tendencies, but one reason why they formed a bond has to do with their shared engagement with decadent aesthetics. Symons was the first to encourage Naidu to publish her poems as a collection, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), and critics like Meena Alexander, Elleke Boehmer, Mary Ellis Gibson, Edward Marx, Chandani Lokuge, Sheshalatha Reddy, Anna Snaith, and Jane Stafford have highlighted how these poems engage with her political positions on cosmopolitanism, Empire, and Indian nationalism.[4] Yet, Naidu's concerns, as Symons implies in his preface to her collection, are also unmistakably articulated through decadent tropes like decay, excess, and extreme sensuality, which is why Lisa Rodensky later included Naidu's work when compiling her anthology of decadent poetry.[5] Of course, other influences exist in Naidu's œuvre – she experimented with sources from British Romantic, Indo-Islamic, and Urdu poetry, as well

as the Indian aesthetic principle of *rasa* [heightened states of sentiment] – but they are refracted through decadent aesthetics.[6]

Naidu's relationship to decadence, however, was not without friction. She sensed early on that her work ran along alternative lines when she read the *Savoy,* the short-lived magazine of decadent literature that Symons established:

> I got the *Savoy*, the newest and youngest of all English magazines, edited by the youngest of editors, Arthur Symons […] but, I am disappointed. [The *Savoy*] is very brilliant, dazzling, but – these boys, are wildly extravagant, wildly audacious – well, I haven't done much else except practicing, but wrote two poems. Rather different in themes to be of some inspiration.[7]

Here, the lure of decadent aesthetics is spliced with a concern about contrasts, suggesting that Naidu was not only aware of her position as an Indian woman in an English boys' club at the heart of the Empire, but that she had also noticed how her poetry was 'rather different' from Symons's and that of his contemporaries.

What were the differences between Naidu and Symons, and how might those differences deepen our understanding of decadence, especially in light of the recent turn toward 'undisciplining' Victorian studies?[8] This essay takes a modest step toward answering these questions by focusing on how Naidu and Symons engaged with a particular strain of decadent aesthetics: Symbolism.

Symons's treatises largely inform our understanding of Symbolism as a genre that privileges the spiritual sphere of analogy, metaphor, and imagery, over the visible world.[9] Symbolist poets, as Barry J. Faulk has explained, were preoccupied with creating word images – 'the images the mind forms in its interactions with the world'.[10] As a result, Symbolist poetry often appears to erase a distinct speaker in order to articulate language at its purest, or what Linda Dowling describes as the 'sensual, visceral basis of gestural language'.[11] Drawing on Charles Baudelaire's theory of correspondences – the notion that there are hidden relations linking the physical and spiritual spheres, and that the poet's job is to reveal those relations – Symbolism ultimately aims, as Symons declared, to articulate the 'disembodied voice, but the voice of the human soul'.[12]

Yet Symbolism is also underpinned by complex colonial and racial politics. This is most obvious when Symbolism turns toward non-white and non-Western subject matter. In this essay, I perform a case study of two poems, Symons's 'Javanese Dancers' (1892), and its twin, Naidu's 'Eastern Dancers' (1896), in order to show how the dynamics of mastery and submission, the colonizer and the colonized, and the white self and the Other, play themselves out through a seemingly apolitical trope: the dance. I argue that these poems, in addition to a set of historical materials, suggest that the pure and universal perspective embedded in Symbolism's founding theories is a fallacy. In Symons's poetry, the disembodied voice of Symbolism is not the voice of the 'human' soul so much as the voice of a white soul that draws correspondences between white women and life, while associating non-white women with death. Four years later, Naidu's poem tries to address Symbolism's inability to sufficiently engage with Otherness by stressing the Other's vitality at every moment. Yet this comes at a cost – one that rests on whether we read the poem's vivid, sensual language as a sign of liveliness, exoticization, or queer desire.

Ultimately, my goal is not to enforce a dichotomy of 'bad imperialist' and 'good native' but to show how Naidu and Symons's poems demonstrate that Symbolism and decadence experienced a crisis when they intersected with what Isobel Armstrong identified as 'an almost obsessive interest in the master-slave dialectic in the last part of the nineteenth century'.[13] Here, Armstrong does not mean poets explicitly depicted master-slave scenes; rather, they obliquely wrote 'in terms of paradigms of power and explored despotic structure through analogy […] rather than writing directly of the political abuse of class oppression and colonialism'.[14]

## If looks could kill: Symons's 'Javanese Dancers'

Dance holds a special place in Symbolist poetry – its non-verbal reliance on bodily gestures evokes what the Symbolists believed language should do. As Symons puts it: dancers 'reach[ed] the brain primarily through the eyes, in the visual, concrete, imaginative way' and each gesture is a 'picture [that] lasts only long enough to have been there'.[15] Dance creates those abstract 'correspondences'

between the signified and signifier, inspiring W. B. Yeats to ask one of the tenderest questions that English poetry has ever uttered: how, indeed, can we know the dancer from the dance?[16]

Symons's 'Javanese Dancers', which he wrote for *The Book of the Rhymers' Club* and later published in *Silhouettes* (1896), is one of the most explicit iterations of this idea in decadent and Symbolist poetry. To quote the poem in full:

> Twitched strings, the clang of metal, beaten drums,
>     Dull, shrill, continuous, disquieting;
> And now the stealthy dancer comes
>     Undulantly with cat-like steps that cling;
>
> Smiling between her painted lids a smile
>     Motionless, unintelligible, she twines
>     Her fingers into mazy lines,
> Twining her scarves across them all the while.
>
> One, two, three, four step forth, and, to and fro,
>     Delicately and imperceptibly,
> Now swaying gently in a row,
>     Now interthreading slow and rhythmically,
>
> Still with fixed eyes, monotonously still,
>     Mysteriously, with smiles inanimate,
>     With lingering feet that undulate,
> With sinuous fingers, spectral hands that thrill,
>
> The little amber-coloured dancers move,
>     Like little painted figures on a screen,
>     Or phantom-dancers haply seen
> Among the shadows of a magic grove.[17]

The tight, almost synecdochal focus on body *parts* – 'lingering feet', 'sinuous fingers', 'inanimate smiles' – epitomizes the paradoxical Symbolist predilection for precise yet suggestive word images. Even the poem's rhyme scheme, which alternates between ABAB and CDDC format and then repeats the latter in the concluding verse, mimics the interthreading 'to and fro' of the dancer's movements. Accounting for the dancer's every gesture, this poem feels like a meticulous aesthetic and sonic record of her dance.[18]

Yet 'Javanese Dancers' also draws correspondences between the dancer's gestures and their signification. In the case of this dancer – a non-white, non-Western Javanese dancer – her

every gesture corresponds to an Orientalized mystery. Simplistically speaking, the poem describes her dance in ways that are animalistic – sometimes likening her explicitly to a cat, and other times implicitly associating her movements with what we see in the nonhuman world ('undulate' and 'twines'). At strategic moments, however, the poem also portrays the *dancer* as 'motionless', 'still', 'fixed', 'inanimate', and 'spectral'. She becomes a motionless surface – 'still […] monotonously still' – and epitomizes the Symbolist ambition to describe a subject through image alone. The speaker voids her of life as they perceive her body's movements but her facial features, where self-expression is usually most intense, are described as 'monotonous' and 'inanimate'. The poem separates the dancer from her art, peeling skin from soul, dancer from dance. Moreover, although Symons titles his poem 'Javanese Dancer*s*' (emphasis mine), the poem collapses the dance company into one representative dancer.[19] Re-casting the corps as though they are a single person – a single image – extends the Orientalist assumption that all Easterners are the same. Why observe them all when gazing at one will do?

To portray dancers in Symbolist terms, then, it appears that they must undergo an existential death. But, of course, it isn't always this way. For example, in 'The World As Ballet', Symons asserts that 'the art of dancing symbolize[s] life', at one point even conceptualizing dance as an art form that can 'create life'.[20] The same correspondences that Symons draws between dance and life in the essay also emerge in his poetry, like the 'Masks and Faces' section in *Silhouettes*, where 'Javanese Dancers' is included with poems about dancers and beloveds. For example, in 'Emmy', a poem about a prostitute, her laughter 'rings in my ears, as bright, | fresh and sweet as the voice of a mountain brook'.[21] Even though she dances 'the dance of death so well', the death referred to here is a moral rather than an existential one, for she burns across the page repeatedly with her 'exquisite youth', 'virginial air', and 'witching smile'.[22]

The same correspondences between dancers, dance, and life also occur in Symons's music hall reviews. These reviews have not gone unnoticed in scholarship on Symons, but Faulk's work is, again, most useful because he notices that Symons's campy sensibilities unsettle his colonial

tendencies, especially in 'A Spanish Music Hall' (1892) and 'At The Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations' (1896). In both reviews, Symons's interest in the art of posing ensures that he restores agency to the dancers that he exoticizes by describing their return to everyday scenes after their performances, and this, according to Faulk, 'has the calculated effect of displacing the sovereign observer from the scene he surveys'.[23]

In 'Javanese Dancers', however, campiness, if it exists, fails to unsettle exoticization in the same way that it does in Symons's reviews. The question, then, is why this failure occurs. Interestingly, what the dancers in 'The World As Ballet' and the 'Masks and Faces' section of *Silhouettes* have in common is that they are white women.[24] The Spanish dancers in 'A Spanish Music Hall' and the British dancers performing Europeanized versions of shows like *Aladdin* in 'At the Alhambra' were white as well – or in the case of the former review, white-passing. As Leire Barrera-Medrano has pointed out, 'A Spanish Music Hall' describes the flamenco traditions of Spain's Romani communities, which Symons viewed as lively and primal. His conclusions, however, are largely facilitated through white-passing dancers: Isabel Santos' daughter is 'pink and white', Señorita Villaclara is 'a fair-complexioned woman', and the only person identified as distinctly non-white is 'a dark Southerner' in the audience.[25]

Similarly, in 'At the Alhambra' Symons is responding to the re-presentation of Eastern cultures through the white body. Two sections of 'At the Alhambra' were previously published in the *St James's Gazette* in 1892, and in these initial drafts, Symons highlights *Aladdin* as a European production, where the dancers are white: 'the new principal dancer, Signorina Pollini, from Milan [...] danced attractively; Mlle. Marie was an excellent Aladdin'.[26] Symons later compares another dancer in *Aladdin,* 'Signorina Legnani [...] in the quaintest little costume [...][dancing] in what might be the Chinese manner' to Simeon Solomon's painting, 'Lady in a Chinese Dress', which depicts a white lady wearing a traditional Chinese *cheongsam* (長衫).[27] The title, which identifies the Other but not the white self, reiterates white Europeanness as the universal norm upon which other cultures might be worn or taken off, echoing what the dancers in *Aladdin* are doing ('wearing'

Eastern culture), or what the white imagination's fantasy about the 'Eastern culture' is, superimposed over the white body.

There is, however, one difference between Solomon's painting and the dance performance. Since the painting depicts the white adoption of an Eastern 'object', the viewer can visually discern boundaries between the *cheongsam* and the white body. Yet, when viewing a dance, if one cannot tell 'the dancer from the dance', then that boundary becomes so ambiguous that, in the case of *Aladdin,* the fact that the dancer is a white Italian woman does not seem to prevent her from embodying China and the Middle East all at once. Through Symons's eyes, 'the East' can only signify life – the 'possibility of endless vistas [...] a thousand shifting signs that refuse or exhaust description' – when articulated through whiteness.[28]

In all of Symons's pieces, then, the dancers are white or white-passing women, or white women pretending not to be white women, and it is their bodies that inspire Symons's core theories about Symbolism, particularly the correspondence he makes between dance and life. Yet in 'Javanese Dancers', the gaze observes the Asiatic body proper, in its shades of brown, bronze, and yellow, un-remediated by whiteness. Indeed, Karl Beckson's biography of Symons confirms that Symons saw the Javanese dancers not in London's music halls but at the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris with Havelock Ellis.[29] Actual Javanese dancers – not white dancers re-presenting a Javanese style – were brought to the exhibition by the Dutch, who had colonized what is now Indonesia. These are the dancers Symons wrote about in 'Javanese Dancers', one of the first poems in his oeuvre that portrays dance as an airless death.

It should be clear by now that the 'correspondences' that Symbolism purported to reveal to the reader were not as universal, or as removed from the visible world, as its practitioners presumed. Symons's bejewelled lines can seduce us into believing that we really are dealing simply with word images, 'pure' language without messy speakers and human interventions, but the fractures in these assumptions fester within 'Javanese Dancers' itself, as indicated in the subtle yet significant moment in line sixteen where 'spectral hands' provoke a surreptitious 'thrill'. For a thrill

to be felt, a body must be there to detect it. If there is a body, then there is a speaker. If the dramatic monologue largely exposes, as Herbert F. Tucker has argued, 'the play of verbal implication that creates character' – how textuality invents a speaker – then Symbolism's pursuit of pure language tries to conceal precisely that play as though there is no speaker in a poem.[30] But there is a speaker there, and we know this because the poem's gaze evinces how they see and feel. In Symons's case, the speaker across many of his pieces is not the disembodied voice of the human soul, but the white soul that has learned to associate whiteness with life and nonwhiteness with death.

The poem's suggestive 'thrill' also highlights another problem. After admitting a 'thrill' – and, by so doing, placing its presumably speaker-less state under threat – the poem reasserts disembodiment with a gesture that is at once Symbolist and Orientalist, for the speaker flattens the dancer into a painted figure and compares her body to a mystified and inscrutable 'phantom'. On the one hand, the dance, once compared to a painted shape, is returned to the Symbolist realm, and, on the other, the similes exacerbate the poem's Orientalist energy and fulfil Symbolism's representational ambitions by producing some of the poem's most dehumanizing gestures.

The real upshot of it all, however, is this: none of the poems about the white dancers in *Silhouettes*' 'Masks and Faces' section can match the prowess of 'Javanese Dancers'. Its carefully wrought language overall is masterful, in both senses of that word – it not only reveals the poet's mastery of Symbolism but also the tradition's ultimate need to *master* its subject matter in order to achieve its own representational ambitions. The more firmly the poem fixes its subject, the sharper the images become. When choosing a dancer to sacrifice, however, Symons repeatedly hesitates to 'master' white or white-passing women, always linking them ultimately to life. The result is that these poems are not as aesthetically complete by the standards that Symbolism set for itself. In 'Javanese Dancers', however, that hesitation vanishes. The poem's Symbolist glory occurs in large part, then, because the poem's gaze has found a subject – an Asian woman - that it could bear to kill.

**If looks could revive: Naidu's 'Eastern Dancers'**

Unlike Symons, Naidu never wrote any essays about Symbolism and, with the exception of 'Eastern Dancers', dance did not preoccupy her as much as it did Symons. However, she sometimes theorized about Symbolism in her letters. In a letter to her publisher, William Heinemann, Naidu rewrites Walter Pater's focus on the Symbolist possibilities of the hawthorn flower in 'The Child in the House'. Here, the protagonist, Florian, encounters the hawthorn and its blushing petals ignite 'a passionateness in his relation to fair outward objects […] a sympathetic link between himself and actual, feeling, living objects'.[31] Like Symons's poem, the gaze here is white and European: in the crimson, Florian perceives 'the world of old Venetian masters, or old Flemish tapestries'. Naidu, however, revises the Europeanized correspondences that Pater's Florian draws:

> Pater, in one of his books, speaks somewhere of the hawthorn being the reddest thing that he had ever beheld but I cannot imagine anything in the world that holds the sumptuous, multitudinous crimsons of the gulmohur [*sic*] flower: it grows in huge bouquets, and it stands for me as a symbol of a hundred passionate and splendid emotions such as the colours that a bride wears on her bridal morn and the hue of the blood that was shed on Rajput battlefields centuries ago: the sacred flame into which the Sati princesses leapt preferring death to dishonour: O it is a wonderful flower, with a wonderful capacity for symbolism.[32]

Naidu replaces Pater's hawthorn with the gulmohar, a flower originally native to Madagascar but well known to Naidu in India, and expands on the correspondences that the gulmohar connotes. Linking the gulmohar to events like a forthcoming marriage and historic wars, for instance, draws associations between joy and bloodshed, union and division, future and past. Florian's encounter with the hawthorn was a European awakening, but Naidu's gulmohar is more varied, unstable, and intercultural, stressing a multiplicity of feelings, histories, cultures, and positionalities.

Yet Naidu's expansion beyond a European frame comes with its own set of problems, at least in this passage. An important critic of colonialism and indigeneity in Empire, Jane Stafford, has concluded that the same passage exemplifies Naidu's self-Orientalizing performance of her

Indianness, for Naidu's references to 'bridal morns, battlefields, and sati […] are sourced more from European orientalism than any local context'.[33] Naidu's revision of Pater's work departs from white Eurocentrism, but Stafford helps us see that this departure is laced with a seeming reliance on self-exoticization, and this tension is echoed in more consequential ways in Naidu's 'Eastern Dancers', which was initially published in the *Savoy*. The poem in full reads:

> Eyes ravished with rapture, celestially panting, what passionate spirits aflaming with fire
> Drink deep of the hush of the hyacinth heavens that glimmer around them in fountains of light
> O wild and entrancing the strain of keen music that cleaveth the stars like a wail of desire
> And beautiful dancers with Houri-like faces bewitch the voluptuous watches of Night.
>
> The scents of red roses and sandalwood flutter and die in the maze of their gem-tangled hair
> And smiles are entwining like magical serpents the poppies of lips that are opiate-sweet,
> Their glittering garments of purple are burning like tremulous dawns in the quivering air,
> And exquisite, subtle and slow, are the tinkle and tread of their rhythmical, slumber-soft feet.
>
> Now silent, now singing and swaying and swinging, like blossoms that bend to the breezes or showers,
> Now wantonly winding, they flash, now they falter, and, lingering, anguish in radiant choir,
> Their jewel-girt arms and warm wavering, lily-long fingers enchant thro' the summer-swift hours,
> Eyes ravished with rapture, celestially panting, what passionate spirits aflaming with fire![34]

Here, Naidu draws on Symbolism but she endeavours to ensure that, unlike 'Javanese Dancers', her dancers are predominantly linked to life. The poem begins with those ravished (rather than fixed) eyes, signalling the same obsession with imagistic body parts in 'Javanese Dancers' – 'slumber-soft feet', 'lily-long fingers', 'jewel-girt arms', 'gem-tangled hair', 'poppies of lips'. Like Symons, Naidu accounts for the movements of the dance itself, but she re-presents her dancers in ways that stress dynamism rather than stagnation through the anaphoric 'now', which records how the dancer moves at every second for the reader – '*now* silent, *now* singing […] *now* wantonly winding […] *now* they falter'.

By choosing the anapestic octometer, Naidu also positions her poem within and against a prosodic tradition that includes Edgar Allan Poe and A. C. Swinburne, with the former famously using anapestic octometer to concoct atmospheric and affective horror in 'The Raven' (1845).

Naidu, however, orients that same prosodic tradition toward excitement rather than terror in this poem, for the anapestic gallop in this case mimics the fast-paced movements of the dance. In some lines Naidu also deploys the anapestic octometer with minimal punctuation. Unlike 'The Raven' where dashes force firm pauses, her unpunctuated lines drive the poem's affective excitement toward a literal breathlessness that becomes especially obvious when one recites the poem aloud. Interestingly, this breathlessness echoes that Paterian desire to fit 'as many pulsations as possible into the given time',[35] but, in this case, Naidu ensures that the subject provoking those pulsations is one that aesthetes like Pater overlooked, and Symbolists like Symons associated with death: the Other.

The Symbolist tendency to play with language through abstraction can be seen in the alliteration and assonance in lines such as 'singing and swaying and swinging', which invite the reader to pay attention to the way that the words sound rather than to their meaning. Even if one were to resist the poem's attempts to pull us into its soundscape, some lines are so abstract that they seduce us into a Symbolist 'spiritual' realm regardless. Does the simile 'like magical serpents', for example, modify 'smiles' or 'lips'? And how can one 'drink deep of the hush of the hyacinth'? Auditory, visual, and olfactory senses are all intensified as they merge abstractly into one lush, synaesthetic phrase. That the poem concludes with the same line (and therefore the same images) with which it began also means that it ties itself back into a full circle – a complete image embedded directly in the form.

In the same way that expanding beyond Pater's Eurocentrism came at a cost, however, the resuscitation of the non-Western, non-white Other in Naidu's poem also causes its own difficulties. Images of blossoms, serpents, jewels, and sandalwood scents fluttering and dying can seem, like the Rajput battlefields and Sati practices that Naidu mentions in her letter, to extend the tropes of exoticization in European Orientalism. These concerns deepen once we consider the poem's historical context. Jeffrey Spear and Avanthi Meduri have discussed how Naidu's poem seems to echo a tendency in fin de siècle poetry to produce idealized depictions of Indian 'Nautch'

dancers who, until the arrival of British colonial law in India which branded them as prostitutes, were previously highly regarded as unchaste yet holy *devadasis.*[36] Questions of caste and class become especially relevant here, for, unlike the 'Nautch' girls, Naidu belonged to a privileged caste, meaning that the self-Orientalization of Eastern Otherness in her poem could also be read as an exoticization of an abject caste.

Yet, unlike the firm historical link between Symons's 'Javanese Dancers' and the Javanese dancers at the 1889 Paris Exhibition that he attended, the link between Naidu and the 'Nautch' dancers is more ambiguous, primarily because the poem actually has two titles. It was initially titled 'Eastern Dancers' in the *Savoy,* and changed later to 'Indian Dancers' when Naidu republished the poem in *The Golden Threshold.* Spear and Meduri base their analysis of the poem on its second title and Naidu's unpublished correspondence about it with Gosse, but the poem's doubled history deserves some pause. That Naidu initially titled the poem as 'Eastern' rather than 'Indian' suggests that she did not necessarily have the 'Nautch' girls in mind when she first wrote the poem. Indeed, the particularly culturally loaded label, 'Eastern', suggests a preoccupation with 'speaking back' to the totalizing gaze of the English boys' club that she was working within and against.[37]

There is one more angle that troubles decisive conclusions about the poem's treatment of the Other. In the same way that we often assume that the speakers of poems like Symons's 'Javanese Dancers' are men, if we presume that the speaker here is, like Naidu, a woman, then it becomes obvious that queer desire may be the basis of the poem – that what we are witnessing in this case is desire between women. Even if one were to dismiss the possibility of a female speaker, the possibility of queer desire opens up once more – this time *between* the dancers themselves – when we account for the perspectival instability in Naidu's poem. Gibson's study insightfully observes that the poem abandons first- or second-person pronouns, favouring the third-person 'their' or no pronoun at all.[38] These choices not only stress the presence of multiple dancers (as opposed to the single representative figure in Symons's poem), but also momentarily collapses the boundaries between the speaker and the dancers, as well as the boundaries between each dancer

in the corps, meaning that some of the poem's descriptions could apply to all subjects in the poem. If smiles are 'entwining like magical serpents', for example, are they exchanged between the dancers themselves, or between the dancers and the speaker? And whose eyes are 'ravished with rapture'? Symons's poem makes it obvious that the speaker and the dancer look at each other in ways that mimic a Hegelian or colonial dialectic, but the gazes in Naidu's poem are multidirectional: the speaker and the dancers could be making eye contact and smiling at one another, but those exchanges could also be happening between the dancers.

Moreover, unlike the idealized 'Nautch' girls who were perceived to perform and service a particular audience, the dancers in Naidu's poem are not represented as exclusively concerned with 'approaching' the speaker as explicitly as Symons's dancer ('and now the stealthy dancer comes'). In fact, Naidu's poem begins *in medias res*. Unlike Symons's poem, the speaker does not have the opportunity to define when the dance begins and ends; instead, the poem suggests that the speaker has stumbled upon a scene rather than attending a performance hosted for their pleasure, thus deploying the same de-centring effect that Symons achieved in his reviews but not in 'Javanese Dancers'. Indeed, Naidu's poem highlights that the only audience these dancers are attempting to 'bewitch' is the personified Night rather than the viewer, which seems to suggest that they are dancing for dancing's sake – women exercising their agency to dance together for their own pleasure.

**Conclusion**

While Symons's poem demonstrates that Symbolist beauty depends on the Other's death, these competing readings of Naidu's poem ultimately suggest that keeping the Other alive within a Symbolist space may depend on using language that is fundamentally ambiguous – language that, in this poem, disorders the boundaries between fetishistic, possessive lust (like mastering the Other in Symons's poem) and an erotic longing that responds more fully to the Other by acknowledging their agency and multiplicity. Indeed, it is precisely this representational ambiguity that transforms

the Other from a reductive figure of exoticized threat in 'Javanese Dancers' into an 'open' signifier, where the fetishization of the Other and the recognition of the Other's agency are at play. Crucially, that fetishistic impulse is perennially available, but it is also not the only articulation of the Other in this poem. This ambiguity in 'Eastern Dancers' should not be interpreted as a mark of Naidu's failure as a poet so much as a reflection of precisely what it is like to exist as an Othered subject within an English poetic tradition like Symbolism: it is to experience continual risk – the risk that the words and images that express the Other's agency or desire are precisely the same words and images that will turn against them. If Symons's 'Javanese Dancers' captures the voice of the white soul, Naidu's 'Eastern Dancers' is its twin because it captures the complexities – and, perhaps, the impossibility – of fully articulating a Symbolist 'voice' for the Other's soul.

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[2] Maharand Paranjape, 'Introduction', in *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s*, ed. by Maharand Paranjape (New Delhi: Kali for Women Raj Press, 1996), pp. vii-xl (p. viii).

[3] Paranjape, pp. xxv–xxvi.

I should note here that critics have taken issue with Symons's preface to *The Golden Threshold,* which, although well-intentioned, seems to Orientalize Naidu and some aspects of her poetry. Although an extensive discussion about their interpersonal dynamics is outside the scope of this paper, see Mary Ellis Gibson for a nuanced discussion about the ways that their relationship moved within and against the typical model of Orientalizing patron and self-exoticizing devotee. Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011).

[4] Meena Alexander, 'Sarojini Naidu: Romanticism and Resistance', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20.43 (1985), WS68–71; Elleke Boehmer, 'East Is East: Where Postcolonialism Is Neo-Orientalist – the Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy', in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 158–71; Edward Marx, 'Sarojini Naidu: The Nightingale as Nationalist', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 31.1 (1996), 45–62; Chandani Lokuge, 'Dialoguing with Empire: The Literary and Political Rhetoric of Sarojini Naidu', in *India in Britain*, ed. by Susheila Nasta (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 115–33; Sheshalatha Reddy, 'The Cosmopolitan Nationalism of Sarojini Naidu, Nightingale of India', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38.2 (2010), 571–89; Anna Snaith, 'Sarojini Naidu: Feminist Nationalism and Cross-Cultural Poetics', in *Modernist Voyages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 67–89; Jane Stafford, *Colonial Literature and the Native Author: Indigeneity and Empire* (Cambridge: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Gibson, *Indian Angles*.

[5] Lisa Rodensky, *Decadent Poetry from Wilde to Naidu* (London: Penguin, 2006).

[6] For a compelling account of *rasa* and Naidu's work*,* see Christin Höne, 'Senses and Sensibilities in Sarojini Naidu's Poetry', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 44.5 (2021), 966–82.

[7] Sarojini Naidu, 'To M. Govindarajulu Naidu', in *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s*, pp. 6–7.

[8] Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, 'Undisciplining Victorian Studies', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 10 July 2020 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/undisciplining-victorian-studies/> [accessed 14 December 2021].

[9] Symons built on his thoughts in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature,* conceptualizing Symbolism as a 'revolt against exteriority'. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, with an introduction by Richard Ellmann (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), p. 3.

[10] Barry J. Faulk, 'Symbolism and Decadence', in *A Companion to Modernist Poetry* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2014), pp. 144–56 (p. 144).
[11] Linda Dowling, 'Disembodied Voices', in *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 175–243 (p. 241).
[12] Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (November 1893), 858–67 (p. 862).
An example of the Symbolist reliance on correspondences can be found in Faulk's 'Symbolism and Decadence', which explains how Stéphane Mallarmé's 'L'Azur' ['The Blue'] turns to analogies such as 'sad chimneys smoke' and 'drifting prison made of soot' to convey the apparent terror of darkness, rather than describing darkness outright.
[13] Dowling, p. 241; Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 398.
[14] Armstrong, p. 398.
[15] Arthur Symons, 'The World as Ballet', in *Studies in Seven Arts* (New York: Dutton, 1907), p. 391.
[16] W. B. Yeats, 'Among School Children' (1928), in *W. B. Yeats*, ed. by John Kelly (London: Everyman, 1997), pp. 56–58 (p. 58).
[17] Arthur Symons, 'Javanese Dancers', in *Silhouettes*, 2nd edn (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 33.
[18] No wonder, then, that reviewers like Rosamund Marriott Watson and Graham R. Tomson should praise this poem as an 'extremely clever *study*' (emphasis mine). See Graham R. Tomson and Rosamund Marriott Watson, 'The Book of the Rhymers' Club', *The Academy and Literature* (March 1892), 294–95 (p. 295).
[19] The ambiguous 'one, two, three, four' in the poem could refer to the possibility of four dancers moving forward, but generally others have conceptualized the phrase as referring to the dancer moving to the beat of the music (e.g., the dancer 'step[s] forth' on the first beat, 'steps to' on another beat, etc.).
[20] Symons, 'The World as Ballet', pp. 389, 390. In the same essay, Symons perceives animality and death in dance as well. Yet, what he means by 'animal life' is religious ecstasy. Similarly, in the one instance where death arises, it does so within the context of birth, where dance embodies the circle of life.
[21] Arthur Symons, 'Emmy', in *Silhouettes*, p. 24. All other references to *Silhouettes* are to this edition.
[22] Other poems, although not about dancers, link the female beloved to life. 'Her Eyes', for example, reiterates that tight, Symbolist focus on body parts but links the beloved's eyes to 'a little flame that dances | A firefly in a grassy nest' (p. 12). In 'Morbidezza', death is evoked by analogy with funeral flowers – white lilies – and a 'frozen moon' (p. 13) hovering above the beloved, but only to play with the half-life that morbidezza (the appearance of extreme softness in sculptures) coyly refers to. Her flesh, the poem claims, 'is lilies' (p. 13) – but regardless of how 'still' it is, the body remains 'virginal' and 'alluring' at the end.
[23] Barry Faulk, 'Camp Expertise: Arthur Symons, Music-Hall, and the Defense of Theory', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28.1 (2000), 171–93 (p. 188). This move, as Faulk argues, allows Symons to highlight how the dancers are in control; they can 'placidly negotiate different spaces, able to regulate the flow of their charisma […] signify their Spanishness and distance themselves from it' (p. 178).
[24] The dancers who inspire Symons's conceptualization of dance more broadly are described as 'alluring by an artificial heightening of whites and reds on the face, displaying, employing, all their natural beauty, themselves full of joy in motion, or affecting that enjoyment, offered to our eyes like a bouquet of flowers […] so human, so remote, so desirable, so evasive'. 'The World as Ballet', p. 387.
[25] Arthur Symons, 'A Spanish Music Hall', *Fortnightly Review* (May 1892), pp. 716–22 (p. 719, p. 720, p. 718). When Symons uses the term 'Moorish', he is describing the dance movements or the chants rather than the dancers, claiming that 'Spanish dancing […] derives its Eastern colours from the Moors' (p. 719).
[26] Jane Pritchard, '"More Natural than Nature, More Artificial than Art": The Dance Criticism of Arthur Symons', *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, 21.2 (2003), 36–89 (p. 53).
[27] Pritchard, p. 57.
[28] Faulk, 'Camp Expertise', p. 185.
[29] Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 50.
[30] Herbert F. Tucker, 'Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. by Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 226–43 (p. 243).
[31] Walter Pater, *The Child in the House: An Imaginary Portrait* (Portland, ME: Thomas B. Mosher, 1896), pp. 30–31.
[32] Sarojini Naidu, 'To William Heinemann. 8 June 1911', in *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s*, p. 54.
[33] Stafford, p. 52.
[34] Sarojini Chattopâdhyây (Sarojini Naidu), 'Eastern Dancers', *Savoy*, 5 (September 1896), p. 84.
[35] Walter Pater, 'Conclusion', in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 118–21 (p. 120).
[36] Jeffrey L. Spear and Avanthi Meduri, 'Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32.2 (2004), 435–48.
[37] It is also possible that the title change to 'India' could have occurred to position the poem more cleanly within the larger focus on Indian nationalism and Indian traditions in *The Golden Threshold*, where other poems are also titled similarly, like 'Indian Weavers', 'Indian Love-Song', 'The Indian Gipsy', and 'To India'.
[38] Gibson, *Indian Angles*, p. 221.