



Newsletter Archives

A Kali in Every Woman: Motherhood and the Dark Goddess Archetype

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Article of the Month - October 2002

Wherever there's a woman in any home
doing her work
screening her smiles with her veil,
she is You, Ma;
she is you, Black Goddess.

Carefully rising with the light of dawn
to attend with softened hands
to household chores,
she is You, Ma;
she is You, Black Goddess.

The woman who gives alms, makes vows, does worship, reads scriptures
all correctly and with a smile
who drapes her sari over the child on her lap
soothing its hunger with a lullaby,
she is You, Ma;
she is You, Black Goddess.

She can't be anyone else;
Mother, sister, housewife
all are You.

- Ramprasad (c.a. 1718-1775)



It is well established in the canons of Indian thought that every woman mirrors in herself the divine feminine. The above piece of poetry goes further and specifically informs us that every female has in herself the Goddess Kali. At first appearances this comes as a surprising shock, not in the least because of Kali's horrific demeanor. Envisioned as totally naked, the visual tales of her terrible form do not end with her dense black color or with the skirt made up of decapitated hands she adorns in her middle, making a mockery of all conventional images of reassurance a goddess is associated with. Further frightening is the necklace she vulgarly hangs around her neck. This is no ordinary necklace. It is made up of heads she has severed from the torsos of beings who were once as much living as you and I are at this moment. And the horrors of horrors, she stands in an arrogant gesture of triumph, one leg placed haughtily over the chest of Shiva, one of the most powerful deities of the Hindu pantheon, and who also happens to be her husband.

The truth behind the mystery of Kali, it seems, is to not be found by a conventional appraisal of her physical appearance. Rather a faithful analysis of the deep symbolism underlying this mighty Goddess is required to penetrate her innermost essence.

Traditional opinion is unanimous in accepting the figure lying under Kali's feet as being that of her husband. Here is what the same poet has to say about this aspect of her iconography:

It's not Shiva
At Mother's feet.
Only liars say that.

The ancients wrote clearly that
while killing demons,
saving the gods from their fix,
Ma stepped on a demon child
fallen to the ground.
At the touch of Her feet
the demon boy changed;
suddenly he was Shiva
On the battlefield.

As a good wife
would She ever
put Her feet
on Her husband's chest?
No, she wouldn't.
But a servant is different:
Ramprasad pleads-
place those fear-dispelling feet
on my lotus heart.

In this striking example, Ramprasad the greatest of Kali's devotees ever, saves her against the accusations that she deviates from the path of a true Hindu wife by subjugating her spouse. In a glorious moment of poetic imagery he establishes in the goddess a power that is capable of transforming a villainous demon into Shiva, the purest of all gods. Why transform this evil being into her husband? She could have changed him into any 'pure ' soul, why grant him the status of her spouse? Why indeed? This may lead us to theorize that by meditating upon the benevolent goddess we, who are the wickedest among all, can achieve this positive transformation. This suggests that in addition to approaching the goddess as a child, she can also be courted as a husband. It must however be stressed here that there is no sexuality involved in this purely emotional process. Beginning her worship as a child we may ultimately evolve into her husband. This process mirrors the rhythmic pattern each of our lives follow, i.e. starting off as a child to our mother and gradually developing into husbands to our wives. Accepting that duality exists in nature, such a hypothesis indeed projects the male in an extremely positive light. But it is the female of the species who comes out with honors here, by resolutely establishing that when they are wives and when they progress to being mothers, Kali forms an integral part of their characteristic buildup.

This positive affirmation does not however explain Kali's blackness as complementary to her motherhood. Things fall into place when we recall how creation manifested itself at the beginning

of the world, when nothing material existed. This primordial state was dark. As is Kali, as is the womb, dark and mysterious. Esoterically speaking black is not a color, but the absence of color. It is what remains when all colors merge into each other, or in other words the fount which has the potentiality to give birth to all the colors of life. Another poet says in this context:

Is my Mother Kali really black?
People say Kali is black,
But my heart doesn't agree.
If She's black,
How can she light up the world?
Sometimes my Mother is white,
Sometimes yellow, blue, and red.
I cannot fathom Her.
My whole life has passed trying.

She is Matter,
Then Spirit,
Then complete Void.

- Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (1769-1821)

It is interesting to note here that in Egypt too, blackness is associated with a positive symbolism, standing for the mothering darkness of germination. Hence every woman by virtue of being a potential mother and possessing the dark, cavernous womb which grants her this capability, is a Kali.



Strangely enough, scarcely having crossed one hurdle in the positive interpretation of the Kali icon as a creative matrix, we are confronted with another contradictory feature, here namely the necklace of skulls ornamenting her beautiful neck. Indeed it is a symbol of death. Believers in reincarnation maintain that before it is invested with a physical body the soul of a man is free and fully alive since it exists in the spiritual world, which is its true sphere of existence. When it is conceived in the mother's interior, its death begins. The womb is thus the symbol of the tomb. Or for those of us, who prefer to be cremated, there are the fires which surround Kali, our archetypal mother. Thus our physical birth is in a way our spiritual death.

Equally enigmatic is the short skirt encircling her tender waist. The amputated hands which are strung together to form this garment represent for her devotees the ultimate act of devotion. This act consists in severing of all attachment to karma and meditating upon Kali as the ultimate refuge. The

path to salvation in this belief lies not in following the karmic way but rather giving up one's complete self in the worship of the Goddess. As Ramprasad says:

Oh my Mind, worship Kali
any way you want-
just repeat the mantra
given to you
day and night.

Think that you're prostrating
as you lie on your bed,
and meditating on the Mother
while you sleep.
When you go about the town, imagine
you're circumambulating Kali Ma.
Each sound that enters your ears
is one of Kali's mantras,
Each letter of the fifty
around Her neck
bears Her name.

Ramprasad says, astonished,
The Goddess Full of Brahman is in every creature.
When you eat,
think that you're making an offering
to Kali Ma.

Kali contains within herself all our actions and the results which ensue thereof. Our hands are the instruments through which we carry out our karma, believing ourselves to be the masters of our own destinies. The goddess allows no such misconception, as she is the giver of life and also its terminator. It is in her that all acts originate and it is into her that they finally dissolve. This is the symbolism implied behind the carelessly flaring skirt, hobbling with the dynamic goddess, and arguably the earliest mini skirt in history.

Thus even the humblest acts we perform during the course of our daily lives is to be viewed as an offering to the Great Mother who is indeed our sustenance and nourisher, both spiritually and materially. Rightly then, one of Ramprasad's poems is entitled 'Satisfy Every Level of Our Hunger O Mother!' It runs like this:

O Mother of the Universe!
You who provide basic sustenance
And subtle nourishment of all creatures!
Please feed us, Holy Mother!
Satisfy every level of our hunger!

I know the mother always feeds her hungry child,
Regardless of its foolishness or carelessness.
Goddess Kali, grant the child who sings this song



Your supreme blessing of total illumination.
Today is the most auspicious day!
Please, Mother, do not delay!

Goddess Kali, my pangs of hunger for reality
Are becoming unbearable.
Mother! Mother! Mother!
You are the longing and the longed for!
You cannot refuse your child's earnest prayer!

The question however remains of Kali's nudity. It is Jesus who points us in the correct direction regarding this issue. In the 'Gospel of Thomas,' he says, in reply to a disciple's question about when he would come again: "When you strip yourselves without being ashamed. When you take off clothes and lay them at your feet like little children and trample on them."

Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese-American philosopher, elaborates:

Your clothes conceal much of your beauty, yet
they hide not the unbeautiful.

And though you seek in garments the freedom
of privacy you may find in them a harness and a chain.

Would that you could meet the sun and the
wind with more of your skin and less of your raiment,

For the breath of life is in the sunlight and the
hand of life is in the wind.

Forget not that modesty is for a shield against
the eye of the unclean.

And when the unclean shall be no more, what
were modesty but a fetter and a fouling of the mind?

And forget not that the earth delights to feel
your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair.

(From 'The Prophet')

Ramprasad concedes that ordinary mortals like himself (and us) could be bedazzled by these stark truths. He expresses similar sentiments, and at the same time grants them the high ground of abstract philosophy:

O sublime Goddess! O naked oneness!
What is the meaning of your nakedness?
Are you shameless, Divine Lady?
Yet even when discarding
royal silks, and golden ornaments
for earrings, bracelets, and anklets

fashioned from human bone,
you retain the dignity of bearing
suited to the daughter of a king.

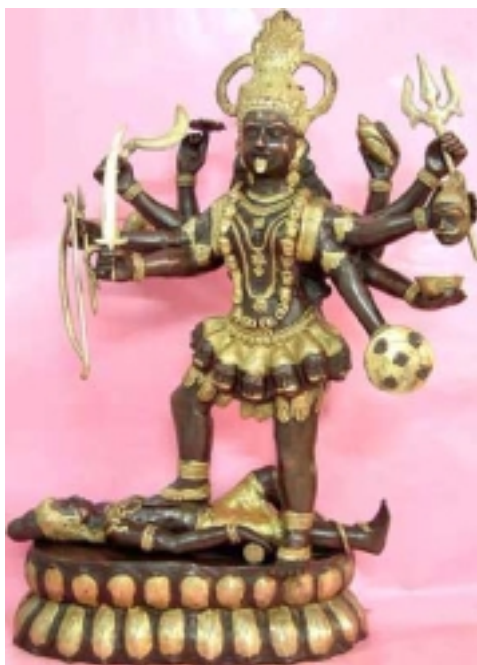
What wild customs you follow, Ma Kali,
trampling on the chest of your noble husband.
You are the naked intensity of divine creativity,
while your consort is naked transcendence.

O Mother of the Universe,
this child is terrified by your naked truth,
your unthinkable blackness, your sheer infinity.
Please cover your reality with a gentle veil.
Why have you thrown away the necklace of pearls
that enhances your divine beauty
Wearing instead this awesome garland of heads,
Freshly severed by the sword of non duality?

Truth is not complicated. An innocent child is untrained in the manners of the world but this does not deprive him from living a zestful and complete life, albeit his/her mother forms an integral part of his unified circle of existence. This is what prompted Wordsworth to say that 'the child is the father of man.' A child is imbued with the quality of intuitive wisdom, which is the undifferentiating intelligence that existed before the world was created. Kali's nudity exhibits this free state of archetypal bliss, of which ecstasy is a characterizing attribute.

Conclusion

Elizabeth U. Harding an intrepid Kali adventurer and fan, describes in her memoirs how laborious and stressful it is to reach the inner sanctum of Kali at the Dakshineswar Temple at Calcutta, owing to the regular galore of devotees who generally swarm her temple. After having reached the inner hall housing the sanctum sanctorum this is what she says:



"Out of sheer awe and admiration one's voice automatically turns into a whisper - yet, there is nothing intimidating about this place.

Ushered into the presence of the deity our voices automatically drop to a whisper, as a tribute of respect to the divine presence. Finally face to face with Kali herself, this is what transpires in the author's mind:

But when one finally stands before Kali, time seems to stand still. Everything stops. The people, the noise - all is mysteriously gone. One stares with wide eyes, forgetting even to blink. All one sees is Kali and nothing else. Overwhelmed with feeling one whispers, 'I love you.' And from within she replies, 'You do so much more for I am the source of your being!'"

This is the spirit in which to approach Kali. The Great Goddess herself will then reveal her mysteries for all of us, solving in the process, the eternal questions of life.

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