

# MYTH AND GENDER IN MARGUERITE YOURCENAR'S "KALI BEHEADED" (KÂLI DÉCAPITÉ)

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## ABSTRACT

*In Indian mythology, Kali is now chiefly perceived as the malevolent wife of Siva. the Goddess Kali is reflected as an enormously authoritative force, created by the masculine gods to kill demons a demon named 'Mahisasura'. She went on a homicidal rage, erratically destroying everything that came in her way, intimidating the very survival of the world. To bring her back to her rearing susceptibilities, the gods enlisted Siva to lie in her path intentionally so that she would step on him and experience shame. There is the benevolent facet in the forms of Parvati, Sati or Gauri but the goddess also has a darker side found in Durga, Caṇḍi and Kali. Yourcenar's interest in Oriental philosophies is of long date. The objective of this paper is to show how the conventional Indian image of the goddess Kali was designed by Marguerite Yourcenar in her short story, "Kali Beheaded".*

**Keywords:** *Oriental, myth, marginalization, emancipation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Marguerite Yourcenar or Marguerite Cleenewerck de Crayencour, was a novelist, short story writer and auto biographer, translator, essayist, and literary critic. Her notable work "Nouvelles Orientales" is an echo of her travels, "Feux", a collection of texts of mythological or religious inspiration interspersed with apophthegms, in which the author deals with the theme of despair in love and sentimental suffering in different modes. In other words, "Nouvelles Orientales" is a collection of short stories that includes ten historical or fantastic stories. Marguerite Yourcenar was enthusiastic about classical Europe and the East. Her the *Oriental Tales*, is a collection of stories published as *Nouvelles Orientales* is a testimony of her inclination towards the East. She showed her interest in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and 'Kâli décapitée' in *Nouvelles orientales* certainly reflects her interest in oriental philosophies from the beginning of her career but "... it was only much later in her career that she began to study them in more depth." (Colvin 2005: 118) "Kali décapitée" or in English "Kali Beheaded" is a short story taken from the "Nouvelle Orientale" or in English "Oriental Tales" translated into English by Alberto Manguel in collaboration with the author in 1985.

This story begins with a detailed description of the goddess 'Kali', who is very dangerous but beautiful. She is feared by everyone: men and women. Moreover, she makes the other gods jealous of her perfection and purity.

Black Kali is beautiful and horrible. Her waist is so slender that the poets who sing about her compare her to the banana tree. Her shoulders are round like the rising autumn moon; her breasts are like buds about to burst; her hips sway like the trunk of the newly born elephant calf; and her dancing feet are like green shoots. Her mouth is as warm as life, her eyes as deep

as death. In turn she gazes at herself in the bronze of night, in the silver of dawn, in the copper of dusk; in the gold of midday, she stares at herself. But her lips have never smiled; a necklace of bones coils around her slender neck, and upon her face, paler than the rest of her body, her large eyes are pure and sad. (119)

The storyline is very short and tells the story of the goddess Kali, who once dictated in 'Indra's heaven' but the other gods, envious of her integrity and magnificence, battered her, cut off her head and cast both her dead body and head down to hell. Nevertheless, they instantly began to lament for the action and went to hell to restore the goddess. They found her pure head lying next to a body and joined the two. Regrettably, the body belonged to a whore and had appeared white and pure only because of blood-loss. The amalgamed Kali now roams the earth, scorched up by the meek, mortal craves pushing her impure body and her godly head weeps for what it is being "compelled" to do. She is described as a wretched as a feverish woman unable to find cool water, she goes from village to village, from crossroads to crossroads, in search of the same mournful delights. Her tiny ankles dance frantically below the chiming anklets, but her eyes never stop weeping, her bitter mouth never kisses ... She drinks heavily and readily gives herself away to the lowest of men: beggars, those who wash corpses, camel-drivers etc. She even became the seducer of children, the instigator of old men, the merciless mistress of the young. She spends her time in the prostitute's quarter and in the most impure places. The divine head fused with the human body cannot ascend to the heaven because the prostitute's body is continuously called to the earth. The new Kali, half woman, half goddess, guided by the memory of the lustful quarters indulges in the pleasures of the flesh and attracts the hatred of abandoned wives. She becomes the queen of assassins and prostitutes.

The end of the story brings Kali to a serene grove where she sees a wise man meditating. She confesses to him the truth about her nature as an impure half-woman and a past goddess. The sage teaches her the eternal truth and requested not to regret either of her mistakes, and that heaven is not necessarily better than her life on earth. This 'Master of Great Compassion' blesses her when the goddess tells him of her pathetic fate that her immaculate head has been fixed to the body of disgrace and she desires, suffers, and yet enjoys.

"We are all incomplete," said the wise man. "We are all pieces, fragments, shadows, matter less ghosts. We all have believed that we have wept and that we have felt pleasure for endless centuries."

"I was a goddess in Indra's heaven," said the harlot.

"And yet you were not freer from the chain of things, nor your diamond body safer from misfortune than your body of flesh and filth. Perhaps, unhappy woman, dishonoured traveller of every road, you are about to attain that which has no shape."

"I am tired," moaned the goddess. Then, touching with the tip of his fingers the black tresses soiled with ashes, he said: "Desire has taught you the emptiness of desire; regret has shown you the uselessness of regret. Be patient, Error of which we are all a part, Imperfect Creature thanks to whom perfection becomes aware of itself, Lust which is not necessarily immortal ..." (124-125)

She detests living but at the same she is scared to die. The compassionate man teaches her the truth that all in this physical world are 'incomplete'. He tells her that like all, she is just as trapped in

the infinite chain of things as a goddess in Indra's heaven as she is being a whore. He ponders whether Kali is close to achieving the 'moksha'.

According to a well-known Indian legend, Kali was created by Brahma, Śiva and Viṣṇu, who were enraged when they heard that the lesser gods had been defeated in battle by the demon 'Mahiṣa'. Their fury led to the creation of the goddess:

Siva's flame became her face, the strength of Yama- her hair, the might of Viṣṇu created her hands, the moon-God created her breast, she was enveloped in Indra's power and force, Varuṇa's strength gave her legs, Prthivi, the earth-goddess, created her hips, her heels were made by Surya, teeth-by Brahma, eyes-by Agni, brows-by the Asvins, nose-by Kubera, ears-by Vayu (Erman and Tiomkin 1987: 171).

The depiction of Kali in the most famous passages regarding the goddess, in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Mahābhārata* and in the *Devīmāhātmya*. She was a ruthless killer (*kala* can also mean death) who took enormous joy not only in combating but also in the very act of slaughtering a human being. She fervently decapitated her victims and drank their blood. She played sport with their heads. She chuckled, while inflicting havoc and slaughter. Kali, like Durga or Parvati, is a representation of Shakti, the mother goddess. In Hindu mythology, Kali is depicted with many arms, a neck garlanded with skulls and a waist surrounded by severed forearms. She has red eyes and tongue and black skin and represents time (*kala*). She is the symbol of destruction. The gods called upon her because they could not defeat the demon 'Raktabija', whose every drop of blood that fell to the ground gave birth to a new demon. In the battle against 'Raktabija', she used her tongue to prevent the demon's blood from falling to the ground.

Kali is also famously the only being ever to conquer the god, Siva. In the states of Bengal and Orissa, the predominant iconography of the goddess shows her standing on the prostrate body of her husband, her tongue hanging out of her mouth.

There are many interpretations of this depiction; some say that Kali, being the Supreme Mother, dominated over even the mightiest gods, others that the goddess merely forgot herself during a bloody battle and now she is biting her tongue for the shame of what she has done to her husband. (Menon, 2001: 37-55)

The 'goddess' in Sanskrit mythology was an exceptionally energetic persona, her vitality sometimes ripping away at the fabric of the universe. If compared, Yourcenar's Kali is comparatively passive; whatever she does is imposed upon her by the desires of her body and it is not self-choice. She is a slave of the destiny, desperately roaming the earth, lamenting her lost life. Only in the end of the story she is reflected herself to gain some faith that it was not all for nothing. Kali portrayed in early Sanskrit literature is a fearful woman.

She is always black or dark, is usually naked, and has long, dishevelled hair. She is adorned with severed arms as a girdle, freshly cut heads as a necklace, children's corpses as earrings, and serpents as bracelets. She has long, sharp fangs, is often depicted as having claw like hands with long nails and is often said to have blood smeared on her lips. (Kinsley 1998: 116)

Joan Howard sees Kali's existence in a unique way:

It is easy enough to predict what would happen to this being if the conflicts that are she were [sic] resolved in the sacrificial way. Kali would cease to roam the plains from Benares to Kapilavastu, from Bangalore to Srinagar, in search of yet another person to seduce. She would

stay home where the woman belongs. She would forgo her jouissance, become chaste. Every carnal call would go unheeded. She would submit, in other words, to the reign of the sovereign head. (Howard 1992:106)

This story first explains the divinity of Goddess Kali, but in the end, she becomes a woman who represents human characters. The goddess Kali who symbolises the power 'shakti', like a mother always saves the world, her children by her perfection but the gods do not accept this victory of Kali. Jealousy destroys the conscience of the gods. In a moment they realized their fault anyway, because without Kali they also lose their source of shakti. At this moment they seek and find the divine head, but not its body. The head is the source of shakti, perfection, intelligence. But the body was not found by the gods. That is their failure. So, they put this divine head on the body of a prostitute. The body symbolises luxury, desire, and pleasure. Now the new Kali becomes a madwoman. She always feels a conflict between her divine head and her human body which makes her restless. She has a lot of power but has no control over herself. She becomes the symbol of destruction and humanity. She was thrown into her new life by chance, through the whim of others. She doesn't control what happens with her, she is driven only by her bodily needs, not her spiritual ones.

The theme of 'transposed head' is very common in Sanskrit texts of Indian myth. The *Renuka/Mariyamman* myth is very famous and popular in southern India, especially in the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. It originated in the *Mahabharata* (III.116.1–18) in which the heroine, Renuka, is executed by her son when she is revealed as having lost her purity by looking at a man with lust. When her husband, the furious sage Jamadagni, found out about her misdemeanour, he fell into a rage and ordered their sons one by one to kill Renuka. Only the fifth, youngest son, Rama followed his father's order. After a while, Jamadagni's anger receded, and he conferred his son a blessing for carrying out the order. Rama decided that he wanted his mother to return from the dead and to be unmatched in battle. These wishes were approved and so in south India, the myth was established and converted and is now locally used to explain the origin of the goddess of smallpox, Mariyamman. It is believed that Renuka/ Mariyamman was the mother of Parasurama, one of Vishnu's incarnations, and the sage Jamadagni was her husband. She was a genuine and charming woman, who had mystical powers that differed on whether she stayed unblemished. One day, she saw a group of heavenly minstrels (*gandharva*) and lust grew in her heart. This earthly desire instantly annihilated her magic. Her husband recognized her crime so, angered, he ordered his son to cut off her head. Parasurama contained the cruel sentence but, remorseful, solicited Jamadagni to bring her back to life. Having learnt the necessary spell from his father, Parasurama went to the execution ground and put his mother's head on a body of a low caste washerwoman. At the same, she also restored the washerwoman's head on his mother's divine body. "The woman with the Brahman head and Pariah body was afterwards worshipped as Mariyamma; while the woman with the marginal or 'other' head and Brahman body was adored as the goddess Yellamma." (Rajagopal 2007: 33). This myth was published in French in the 18th century by the botanist and explorer, Pierre Sonnerat. In his *Voyage aux Indes orientales et à la Chine, fait depuis 1774 jusqu'à 1781*, he retold an oral rendition of the story that he had heard in Tamil Nadu. Wendy Doniger points out,

...the theme of the human with the wrong head is incredibly malleable. It is always about much the same thing - death, sex, disorder, dichotomy, the interruption of the divine or animal into

human life – but what it says about what it is about is quite different in each instance. Something is cut away from something else. But what is that something? (Doniger 1999: 226)

The myth of Kali was recorded from an oral account by Henry Whitehead between the years 1883 and 1899. Whitehead takes particular interest in the myth and interprets it in this way:

The story is an interesting one, because it probably describes the fusion of the Aryan and Dravidian cults in the days when the Aryans first found their way into South India. A Pariah body with a Brahman head is an apt description of the cult of Śiva, while a Pariah head with a Brahman body might well describe some of the cult of the ancient Dravidian deities, modified by Brahman ideas and influences. (Whitehead 1921: 116).

Therefore, it is very evident that there is the impact of Indian myth/the Mariyamman myth of Indian/oriental context in the narrative of Marguerite Yourcenar's "Kali Beheaded", the main comparison being the transposition of heads that occurs between the castes. Interpreting and analysing the myth, Wendy Doniger expresses:

Since higher castes often regard lower caste women as erotic, and her body ends up lower caste, we might assume that it is the sight of her eroticism ... And her impure bottom half, the half that lusts for the demigod, is the human woman, the denied woman, as polluting and despised as the Outcaste. (Doniger 1999: 208)

Yourcenar's Kali is not only a social *pariah* because of the impure body she possesses but also because she lets her desires force her with all abandon. Kali becomes an unstoppable seductress only when her divinely pure head is attached to the 'impure bottom half'. She was almost certainly influenced by an account she read in Pierre Sonnerat's *Voyage aux Indes orientales*. And, although the myth that most likely interested her had been processed and transformed on its journey through language and cultural barriers, it is evident that much of what one can find in Sonnerat's version rings true with the original versions of the myth.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, it is evident that the representations of the goddess 'Kali' in Eastern and Western texts reflect the position of women in divinity as well as society. The gothic flavour and effect, inspired by the much-feared divinity enhances the interest, it offers a survey of the representations of the goddess in subcontinental texts, followed by a survey of their Western counterparts. Marguerite Yourcenar's tale "Kali Beheaded" is an intensified example of '*shakti*' in true sense. During the epic period, Kali's first and most important traits – that of a warrior goddess – appear from an episode of *Mahabharata*. In Hindu writings, as much as in the Western ones, Kali is cosmic, demonstrating noble wrath, directed against various demons, but she is also the goddess who delights in killing, abjection, and unleashed sexuality. The worshippers prefer to focus on her benevolent aspects since, although never shy of punishing wrongdoers, Kali is also capable of forgiveness and compassion which can be traced in Indian women distinctly. Marguerite Yourcenar's tale is a beautiful amalgamation of the mythical representation of oriental 'Kali', societal positioning of the oriental and occidental female folk, confrontation of centre and margin and above all, deep Indian philosophical interpretation of '*karma*' and '*moksha*'.

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