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# Loving Paradoxes: A Feminist Reclamation of the Goddess Kali

VRINDA DALMIYA

*The feminist significance of the Goddess Kali lies in an indigenous worshipful attitude of "Kali-bhakti" rather than in the mere image of the Goddess. The peculiar mother-child motif at the core of the poet Ramprasad Sen's Kali-bhakti represents, I argue, not only a dramatic reconstruction of femininity but of selfhood in general. The spiritual goal of a devotee here involves a deconstruction of "master identity" necessary also for ethico-political struggles for justice.*

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## I: WHY KALI, AGAIN?

The iconography of the Goddess Kali from India comes as a dramatic relief in our search for alternative constructions of femininity and motherhood. Witness the following hymn describing Kali:

Mother, incomparably arrayed,  
Hair flying, stripped down,  
You battle-dance on Shiva's heart,  
A garland of heads that bounce off  
Your heavy hips, chopped-off hands  
For a belt, the bodies of infants  
For earrings, and the lips,  
The teeth like jasmine, the face  
A lotus blossomed, the laugh,  
And the dark body billowing up and out  
Like a storm cloud, and those feet  
Whose beauty is only deepened by blood.  
So Prasād cries: My mind is dancing!

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Can I take much more? Can I bear  
 An impossible beauty?  
 (Ramprasad 1982, 65)<sup>1</sup>

The feminine here is powerfully terrifying: A naked and intoxicated female—dark, bloodstained, and dishevelled—dancing on the prostrate body of Shiva, her husband, with her tongue lolling out, wearing nothing except a garland of human heads around her neck, a girdle of severed human hands around her waist, and infant corpses as earrings. Yet, strangely enough, the devotee sees in this macabre picture an “impossible beauty” and a “mother.” The mother here is anything but domestic (engaged as she is in a battle-dance) and anything but nurturing (adorned as she is with symbols of death—skulls, corpses, and blood). Yet, on beholding this grotesque form, the poet’s “mind is dancing.”

Such exuberant juxtaposition of polarities in the image of Kali has been interpreted by many<sup>2</sup> as holding feminist messages. Taken as signifying a rupture of water-tight exclusions, Kali has been brought on stage as the redeemer both of Nature and of women. The project in this paper is to rewrite her script for such redemption. Most reclamations of Kali concentrate on the *symbol* of the goddess as representing a collapse of typically “Western” binary thinking. My claim here is that this understanding is not enough. I propose a shift from Kali as a spiritual icon taken out of context to an indigenous form of *Kali-bhakti*.<sup>3</sup> What is of feminist significance is not simply the paradoxes in the image of Kali but rather a devotee’s worshipful *attitude* towards Kali, called *bhakti*. In order to make my argument, I take as an exemplar of *Kali-bhakti* the devotional poems (addressed to Kali) of Ramprasad Sen, an eighteenth-century Bengali poet. These poems, sung to a variety of set musical scores, figured very prominently in the spiritual life of Sri Ramakrishna, the modern nineteenth-century Indian Saint.<sup>4</sup> That they are not mere exotica is evidenced by their popularity even in contemporary Bengal. They are still sung in Bengali households and form an integral part of a living tradition constituted by modern devotees of Ramakrishna. Incidentally, the fact that Ramprasad (the composer of these songs) and Ramakrishna (the Saint who made extensive use of them as a means of devotional expression) are *men* is not unimportant for my analysis. We shall see that embedding the symbol of Kali in Ramprasad’s *Kali-bhakti*<sup>5</sup> actually deepens the paradox and confluence of opposites that attracted the attention of feminists to the image of Kali in the first place.

Let us, however, first analyze just how or why Goddess Kali comes to be a site of apparent contradictions. First and foremost, Kali is both a wife and a mother. But she is also an *immodest*, *aggressive*, and *grotesque* wife and a *terrifying*, *violent*, and *self-absorbed* mother. Now Kali does not constitute a straightforward redefinition of the concepts of “wife” and “mother”: that these concepts retain their usual connotations of conventional subservience (in the case of “wife”)

and caring attentiveness (in the case of “mother”) becomes clear as Kali is constantly admonished for her deviations from societal norms definitive of wifehood and motherhood. Note Ramprasad’s outbursts:

Kālī, why are You naked again?  
 Good grief, haven’t You any shame?  
 Mother don’t You have clothes?  
 Where is the pride of a king’s daughter?  
 And Mother, is this some family duty—  
 This standing on the chest of Your man?  
 (1982, 46)

And then,

Rāmprasād asks: Who taught You to be so cold?  
 If You want to be like Your father—  
 Stone<sup>6</sup>—don’t call Yourself  
 The Mother.  
 (1982, 32)

In effect, then, it is the adherence to very traditional expectations (associated with being a wife and mother), rather than their abandonment, that enables Kali to be a self-conscious representation of opposites. Thus, because Kali is a wife and mother in very conventional senses, she suggests passivity and tenderness. But her manifest form is violent and uncaring. Consequently, Kali comes to symbolize the paradoxical dyads: passivity/aggressiveness; traditionality/unconventionality; beautiful/grotesque; tender/terrifying.

Yet another paradox has to do not so much with Kali’s image (or iconography) but with the bhakti lyrics in which she is invoked. While Kali is clearly Divine and deserving of the utmost obeisance, an expression of Ramprasad’s Kali-devotion is often through poems that chide, berate, and scold her. Praying to Kali becomes a relentless litany of her faults and misdemeanors, and these are harped upon in the very act of seeking redemption through her! So not only is Kali paradoxical herself, but so also is the *love* of Kali. The question here is whether a devotional posture expressed in this odd form and addressed to an apparently odd Goddess can hold out any promises for social and environmental movements for justice. The more general issue is whether spirituality—this specific form of Goddess spirituality—can have any relevance for feminist agendas to end exploitation. To anticipate my conclusion: the devotee (like Ramprasad) expects, or hopes for, spiritual liberation (what I call here “transcendent liberation”) through Kali-worship. But the logical structure of such redemption (even when interpreted monistically as merging with an Absolute) is complex enough to entail an ethical stance that is consonant with feminism.

The advantages of the shift from Kali to *Kali-bhakti* will become clear as we go along. It is best to remind ourselves at this point that the use of spiritual symbols from the East (like the Kali icon) as an antidote for “dualistic thinking” in the West is problematic in more ways than one. First, the move, in its attempt to overcome conceptual dualisms within “Western” thought, underscores and reinforces a much deeper dualism and Orientalism—the *rationality* of the West versus the *spirituality* of the East. The rationality/spirituality divide mapped on to the West/East distinction comes in handy to deprive the “East” of rationality and “mind” which, in turn, reinforces a whole range of hierarchies. Second, it is too easy a transition from Kali as a symbol of contradictions to Kali as a symbol of an undifferentiated monism. But if transcendence of dualism is to be geared toward securing greater social justice, it is not clear how an appeal to an undifferentiated spiritual ooze can help. Spirituality could be now seen not just as the transcendence of dualism, but of the empirical, the political, and thereby of the very domain of justice itself. How can we meaningfully talk of just relationships if there is no plurality to order and relate? Third, do not the hopelessly oppressive institutions of the home cultures from which these symbols are transported bely their effectiveness as instruments of liberation? Since Kali co-exists quite happily with patriarchal structures and the oppression of women in India, can there be any real feminist potential in her symbolism or worship after all?

Each of these worries is important. But the pitfalls of trying to derive a politics from the realm of spirituality are far greater if we concentrate simply on the Kali-icon. It will become clear only at the end of the paper how relocating to *Kali-bhakti*, to an indigenous worshipful love for Kali, alleviates the first two objections. But let me begin by commenting briefly on the more general third charge made above—the objection that spiritual formations that co-exist with traditional patriarchal formations cannot be linked to liberatory politics.

I am not claiming that Kali in India is a feminist principle. As is well known, it has often been argued that the formulation of female divinity is a ploy to keep real power away from real women in the real world or that the terrifying image of Kali is a creation of phallocentric fear of female sexuality gone wild. By indicating how Goddesses have been otherwise appropriated, such arguments might also explain the hesitation that many Indian feminists feel about making use of Goddess symbols.<sup>7</sup> Now it is undeniable that the mere presence of spiritual phenomena—like Mother Goddesses or Bhakti saints<sup>8</sup>—do not, by themselves, ensure a just society. But simply because an image has been (and can be) manipulated to serve the ends of patriarchy does not imply that it has no positive value or that it cannot be further manipulated to serve other ends. It is the possibility of such an alternative encashing of a spiritual phenomenon that is being suggested here. Note also that what is controversial in the Indian context is not the relevance of Goddess symbols for political purposes per se.

The Indian nationalist movement<sup>9</sup> and, more recently, the fundamentalist Hindu agenda<sup>10</sup> show quite clearly how Goddesses and spirituality *can* be used for political ends. What is in question is the attempted use of female spirituality for the *feminist* agenda.

Examples of how the “Goddess phenomenon” has been manipulated to create particular instances of escape from oppression—of how the very predominance of Goddess worship in traditional Indian society creates interesting spaces for individual women in their struggle for survival—are not hard to find.

- (a) The Bengali short story by Mahasweta Devi, “Sanjh Sakaler Ma”—literally, “Mother of Dusk and Dawn” (Mahasweta Devi 1993)—tells the tale of a young destitute widow who decides in desperation to “fake” possession by the Goddess and uses the offerings given to her-as-Devi by her devotees during the day to feed her (as-mortal-woman’s) son at night. Thus it is the societal acceptance of her as a Divine Mother that enables her to function as a human mother in an overwhelmingly harsh environment.
- (b) Alternatively, in recounting her experience of domestic violence in the feminist journal *Manushi* (vol. 3, no. 2. Jan/Feb, 1983),<sup>11</sup> a young woman, Sumitra, relates how her mother-in-law claimed “possession by the Goddess” when she tortured Sumitra. But, interestingly, we find Sumitra *herself* stepping into the Goddess’s footprints in her attempt to summon up the courage to retaliate. This move is successful because, through it, she could create for herself at least a short respite while her abusive husband “sat and listened with folded hands. He really believed that the goddess was speaking.” (1983, 18).
- (c) On a more theoretical plane, Lina Gupta, in her very comprehensive paper, “Kali, the Savior” (1991), ingeniously argues that Kali can embody the liberation of tradition itself from its patriarchal bias: “Kali as a woman, as a wife, knows what her status should be. As she dances the dance of destruction she communicates her responses to the way things are and the way they should be. That is, in her destructive dance she creates her own reality” (37). Kali can thus symbolize the destruction of patriarchal interpretations of herself!

I do not pursue any of these arguments here. Rather, what I attempt is the derivation of an alternative model of self-construction and of self-other relationship from an analysis of a particular genre of devotional poetry addressed to Kali. This model of the self, we shall see, comes very close to the “relational self” of some western feminists. According to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, the “recuperation of the/an Hindu goddess as feminist is problematic at the present historical juncture both for its assumption of an undifferentiated ‘woman-power’ as well as for its promotion of a certain radicalized Hinduism” (Sunder Rajan 1998, ws–34). The dialogue initiated here over the *metaphysics of the self*

is neither of the above because it does not tap into an essentialized womanhood nor does it promote the formation of a “*Hindu*” self.<sup>12</sup> The spiritual motif here is quietistic and antithetical to instrumental rationality on one level; but, on another, it is suggestive of ontological transformations without which even very self-consciously adopted socio-political agendas for change might not be effective. So *Kali-bhakti* is being used here to deconstruct “master identity” and to suggest an alternative.

The attempted deployment of *Kali-bhakti* could have another advantage specifically for certain strains of ecofeminism. Vandana Shiva, probably the most prominent of Indian ecofeminists, has focused on reclaiming the philosophical notion of *Prakṛti*. *Prakṛti* is the creative and dynamic ontological principle unique to a particular Indian world-view which, according to Shiva, entails an anti-Cartesian “living, nurturing relationship between man and nature” (Shiva 1988, 39). But one of the problems with her analysis is that *Prakṛti* (the blueprint for liberatory practice, according to Shiva), is an abstract metaphysical principle of high philosophy, codified in Sanskrit texts accessible only to an elite. This naturally raises the question of how marginalized, rural women most affected by environmental degradation can ever access this key to their redemption. Of course, Shiva herself is careful to deny the separation between the popular and elite imaginations and to emphasize the knowledge of *Prakṛti* through gendered and non-intrusive practices of silviculture and agriculture still prevalent in Indian villages. In spite of this very important epistemic concession, the *urban poor* remain cut off from *Prakṛti* because they are engaged neither in agricultural practices nor in classical scholarship. Replacing *Prakṛti* by *Kali-bhakti* can broaden the epistemic base further and show how subjects engaged neither in textual scholarship nor in agriculture may still have cognitive access to a philosophical principle through worship and devotion.

To understand this epistemological importance of *Kali-bhakti*, it is necessary to underscore that Kali is a representation of *Prakṛti*. Even a simple devotee like Ramprasad is quite clear on the idol’s representational significance: what is worshipped is not merely the image/idol/picture of Kali but what she stands for. For instance:

My mind dreams up this image  
 I could make with clay.  
 But is Mother clay?  
 . . . . .  
 Can an image of clay  
 Cool the mind’s fever?  
 I’ve heard the hue of Her skin is black—  
 A black that lights the world.  
 Can an image of clay be made  
 That marvelous dark with a coat of paint?

Kālī cuts down evil.  
Is this the work of straw and clay?  
(1982, 61)<sup>13</sup>

The intentional object of *bhakti* (the Goddess, Kali)—the idol fashioned out of clay—is grasped as being symbolic. Any ordinary devotee, in relating to the Goddess, understands that he or she is relating to the metaphysical truths that the Goddess stands for. In the spiritual moment, this truth is codified not in dead, lifeless propositions but in the form of the Goddess. So who/what is approached with “love” in *bhakti* is not an “image” made out of “straw and clay” and covered with a “coat of paint,” but something *more* that these externals are used to represent. What we have here, then, is a sort of “emotional knowing” of fundamental truths. By emphasizing direct and personal contact with the Divine, the *bhakti*-movement itself arose in India, according to some, as a revolt against Brahmanical traditions that required scholarship and mediation of institutionalized priests for a contact with the deity. In *bhakti*, anyone—irrespective of caste, creed, learning, and gender—could qualify as a devotee and be capable of the appropriate emotion. Instead of with costly ritual offerings, the Goddess could now be worshipped just “with tears.”<sup>14</sup> By focusing on this lived spiritual/devotional relationship to Kali, we have a solution to the epistemological problem thrown up by theories like that of Shiva’s—the problem of how theoretical principles serving as the feminist fulcrum can be *known* from the fringes in a rigidly hierarchical society. Kali is representative of a philosophical truth. *Bhakti* is an egalitarian and personalized relationship with Kali. Consequently, through *Kali-bhakti*, the devotee—*anyone* who chooses to be a devotee—can access philosophical truth through a lived relationship. Kali-worship can thus bring together the metaphysical, the epistemological, and, as I shall argue (in the last two sections), an ethico-political vision. Before pursuing this line of thought, however, let us try to get a flavor of this lived relationship as found in Ramprasad’s Kali-poetry.

## II: WORSHIPPING KALI/LOVING THE MOTHER

Personalization of the human-Divine relation which is the essence of *bhakti* can be captured by many motifs: an erotic bond between lovers; the playful comradeship between friends; the complete dependence of a slave/servant/valet on his master; or the attention-demanding petulance of a child before its mother. Though we do find devotional poetry in which the “human” is a harried mother bringing up a mischievous and playful child-God (for example, SurDas identifying himself with Yashoda, Krishna’s mother) or a lover yearning for union with a Divine Lover (MiraBai),<sup>15</sup> Ramprasad casts himself primarily as the *child* of a Divine Mother. Moreover, he is often a rebellious and quarrelsome child, throwing tantrums, feeling neglected, and flinging accusa-

tions. This graphic expression of all the ambivalences of childhood, in some beautiful poetry, is his devotion. Here are some samples:

You think motherhood is child's play?  
 One child doesn't make a mother if she is cruel.  
 Mine carried me ten months and ten days  
 But doesn't notice where I've gone when it's time to eat.  
 When a child is bad, his parents correct him,  
 But You can watch Death come at me  
 With murder in His heart  
 And turn away yawning.  
 (1982, 32)

You'd snatch the fruit out of the hand  
 of a child, eat it Mother, and cheat him.  
 (1982, 34)

I'm not calling you Mother anymore,  
 All You give me is trouble.  
 I had a home and a family, now  
 I'm a beggar—what will You think of  
 Next, my wild-haired Devi?  
 I'll beg before I come to You,  
 Crying "Mother." I've tried that  
 And got the silent treatment.  
 If the mother lives should the son suffer,  
 And if she's dead, hasn't he got to live somewhere?  
 Rāmprasād says: What's a mother  
 Anyway, the son's worst enemy?  
 I keep wondering what worse You can do  
 Than make me live over and over  
 The pain, life after life.  
 (1982, 35)

What's so good in You  
 That You deserve to be called Mother?  
 . . . . .  
 Because of You, Mother, Father is crazy,  
 With Stepmother<sup>16</sup> sitting on His head.  
 Twice-born Rāmprasād says: people mock me.  
 They say: "If your mother is Annapurna,<sup>17</sup>  
 Why isn't there food in your father's house?"  
 (1982, 45)

One could try to analyze the poetic function of such insults and accusations in an expression of devotional passion or to address the more general question

of why such petulance, bordering on the blasphemous, could ever be prayer. My concern, however, is primarily whether this mother-child motif central to Ramprasad's *Kali-bhakti* can help to sustain self transformations that can, in turn, undercut exploitation. I look, therefore, at the idiosyncracies of the kind of *mother* Kali is and the kind of *child* Ramprasad is, in order to grasp the full significance of the kind of *mother-child* nexus being spoken of here.

### III: THE "MOTHER" OF THE CHILD

Of course, the valorization of motherhood is not unproblematic for feminism. Motherhood is, more often than not, the site for the oppression of women, and hence becomes controversial as a feminine symbol of womanhood.<sup>18</sup> However, the root of Ramprasad's devotional outbursts is the fact that his mother is really a "bad" mother. And herein lies his redemption! What we should remember, then, is that the addressee of Ramprasad's devotion, Kali, is not a simple mother but the "terrible," "crazy," or "mad" mother. She exceeds what is allowed by the traditional construction of "mother." The extra connotation (as noted earlier) is not usually something consistent with motherhood ordinarily conceived—which makes the object of Ramprasad's devotion a self-consciously constructed paradox.

Gods and Goddesses in the Indian tradition are generally constituted in three layers.<sup>19</sup> On one level (*ādhidaivika*), they are iconographically represented celestial beings whose intricate biographies are narrated in mythological tales. On the second level (*ādhyātmika*), they are vital principles of the lived-body of the devotee. Finally, on the third level (*ādhibhautika*), they are principles in the environment or cosmos. Thus a Devi (Goddess) is not only a suprahuman deity but is simultaneously a principle in the inner and outer realms. An act of worship thus consists in dwelling on a deity, on a vital principle (internal to the body) and on a cosmic principle all at once.

On the *ādhidaivika* level, Kali is the naked Goddess iconographically represented in the manner spelled out at the beginning of the paper. There are numerous and fascinating stories as to why she came to be that way. I shall not go into the detailed accounts of her celestial biography that draw out the kinship relations between Kali and the other members of the Hindu pantheon.<sup>20</sup> Ramprasad, however, takes even this *ādhidaivic*, or "deity-aspect," to be representational. Whatever else Kali might be, it is clear that, according to him, she stands in for *all* women:

You'll find Mother  
In any house.  
Do I dare say it in public?  
. . . . .  
She's mother, daughter, wife, sister—  
Every woman close to you.

What more can Rāmprasād say?  
 You work the rest out from these hints.  
 (1982, 60)

As the symbol of femininity, Kali may be read in two ways: as serving patriarchal purposes and emerging from male fear of female sexuality; or as a genuine feminine self-assertion and power, a mother who is not afraid of stepping out of the conventions of motherhood to express herself—her rage and her needs. But the point to be emphasized is that Kali always signifies *more* than the feminine.

The *ādhyaṭmika* aspect of Kali is spelled out by the meditational metaphysics of Tantra.<sup>21</sup> Kali is now a vital force (*kulakundalini* or “serpent power”) at the base of the spinal column. An elaborate “geography of the body” indicates different “centers” and “pathways” through which this vital force can flow and be guided. Spiritual progress is equivalent to yogic control of the *kulakundalini*, making it rise to the “highest center” in the crown of the head. This is the state of blissful repose.

Now cry Kālī and take the plunge!  
 O, my Mind, dive into this sea,  
 . . . . .  
 . . . Now, hold your breath  
 And jump! Kick down to where She [Kulakundalini] sits  
 Deep in the wise waters, a great pearl.  
 (1982, 54)<sup>22</sup>

The ascent of the *kundalini* to its peak is represented iconographically by the dancing Kali frozen into immobility (achievement) upon stepping on Shiva (the “highest center”).

In Her outer/ecological, or *ādhibhautika*, aspect, Kali is simply “nature”—the word for which, in some of the vernaculars, is *prakṛti*. The mad Goddess is now wild, unpredictable, and capricious *nature*, the “storm-cloud” that can cause floods (by her presence) or famine (by her absence). Her frenzied dance is the eternal change of the natural order. Her terrifying form is a pictorial expression of the brutal fact that everything in nature is constantly changing—and change is really decay and finally death.

Analyzed in this way, the Goddess Kali is simultaneously an *internal* principle and everything *outside*. Obviously, such identification can make sense only within a certain metaphysical framework. This metaphysical vision implicit in Kali-worship is articulated in the ontological principle of *Prakṛti*. Kali as *Prakṛti* (with a capital P) is to be distinguished from nature or *prakṛti* (with a small p). Kali/*Prakṛti* is the Ultimate monistic stuff from which everything emerges but which nevertheless is distinct from and transcends these emergents. Just as the Spinozistic *natura naturans* from which the world of plurality or *natura naturata* emerges remains distinct from its evolutes, the Ultimate

metaphysical *Prakṛti* is not to be reduced to the plurality of nature that evolves out of it. *Prakṛti* gives birth to, but is not exhausted by, the plural nature around us. Kali as *Prakṛti* is the source of everything and is thus a metaphysical “Mother.”

... You are the Mother of all  
And our nurse. You carry the Three Worlds  
in Your belly.  
(1982, 28)

The nudity of Kali is now explained by the utter privacy of her being the “First” and the “Only” one. Can there be modesty where there is no multiplicity? Shame is generated by the gaze of others; in the primal moment, since there is no one other than Herself in the total self-absorption of the moment of giving birth, there is and can be no shame. It is interesting that in a poem quoted earlier, Ramprasad, exasperated by Kali’s nakedness, goes on to plead

O, Mother, *we* are dying of shame,  
Now put on Your woman’s clothes.  
(1982, 46, emphasis mine).

It is important to note that Kali’s metaphysical motherhood is very different from biological motherhood. The latter not only requires impregnation by a male but is also constructed as being the more passive of the two roles in procreation. In the former, emanation from *Prakṛti* is not dependent on a male—being the source of everything, *Prakṛti* is prior to even the male. Secondly, *Prakṛti* is definitely the active principle in generation. Shiva, the male, is clearly subordinate to Kali—note the *dance* (activity) of Kali on a passive Shiva’s chest. Look at Ramprasad’s explanation of how Kali got to step on Her husband’s body:

All right, You crazy woman,  
Get down off the Great Lord’s chest!  
.....  
Now get down before His ribs cave in—  
O Shiva’s Woman, You’re pitiless, pitiless.  
.....  
Rāmprasād thinks He’s playing dead  
Just to have Your feet touching Him.  
(1982, 47)

Shiva here is clearly in *need* of Kali’s touch and is utterly powerless lying under her.

However, Shiva symbolizes *cit*, or consciousness. And one may worry whether this is not, once again, the age-old association of “mind” with the masculine and the “stuff/matter” with the feminine. A crucial question here

is whether Shiva's dependence on Kali and his ineffectiveness without Her signify a metaphysical dualism after all—whether Shiva and Kali are not two distinct ontological categories that must cooperate for the creation of the world. In the dualistic Samkhya system, for example, a motionless but conscious *Puruṣa*<sup>23</sup> must conjoin with a dynamic but material *Prakṛti* to generate the world. But since Ramprasad's conception of *Prakṛti*/Kali is housed in the sharply different metaphysics of Tantra, Kali, as the primordial stuff, is not only dynamic energy but is also conscious and has will. By Her own desire to create, She differentiates Herself into a male and a female whose subsequent union creates the world. Thus the representation of such an ontology cannot be just Kali, nor Kali and Shiva together but of Kali-dancing-on-Shiva.<sup>24</sup> What we have is a monistic principle whose internal complexity is represented by two divine figures.

The dance of Kali is an important metaphor. A dance suggests playfulness and light-heartedness. Equally importantly, it is constant movement or change. Etymologically, *Kali* is a feminine form of *kāla*, which means time. But time and change are just euphemisms for decay and death. Kali is thus the paradox: She is the Primal Mother who brings forth all life even while she signifies Death. Everything that there is, everything “natural,” is the vale of Death even though it is nothing other than Kali/*Prakṛti*, the source of life.

#### IV: THE “CHILD” OF THE MOTHER

True to the convention of *bhakti*-poetry, Ramprasad writes himself into his lyrics in the signature lines (*bhanitā*) at the end of each poem. This helps to personalize the emotion and establish an intimacy with the addressee of the poem. The most striking aspect of Ramprasad's *bhakti* poetry, however, is that his voice is that of a child.

This is significant in more ways than one. Though it is true that Ramprasad thinks of himself as a “son,” the self-conscious posture of a child suggests an attempt to step out of the gendered identity of a “man.” Ramprasad is a man but he has to *become* a child in approaching Kali. Not only that; he is a “bad,” weak, suffering, and needy child:

What am I—a rickety thing  
Born a month early?  
(1982, 49)

A blind man clutches the cane he's lost  
Like a fanatic. So I clutch You, Mother.  
(1982, 25)

All this is quite consistent with the general temper of *bhakti* in which the devotee approaches the deity with the utmost humility and in complete sur-

render. In male *bhakti* saints this leads to an interesting scenario. Since being male is usually associated with social power, a male saint not only has to cast off the usual forms of security and ego, but has also to abandon his maleness to attain the powerlessness required for *bhakti*. Interestingly,<sup>25</sup> in a few poems, Kali and Ramprasad switch roles: Kali becomes the girl-child (called Uma) and Ramprasad himself becomes the mother complaining to her husband.

O Giri,<sup>26</sup> I can't comfort  
Your Umā anymore.  
She cries and pouts,  
Won't touch the breast,  
Won't touch Her *khir*  
And shoves away Her cream.  
(1982, 41)

Here we have a double move: Not only does Ramprasad consciously adopt the posture of a female (that of social powerlessness), but, in the classic stance of a true *bhakta*, appears powerless before a Deity who is now a self-willed little girl! Thus the "child" in Ramprasad's poetry signifies a deconstruction of the power. We are in a form of devotion in which being feminine is seen as an advantage.<sup>27</sup> Intriguingly, when Ramprasad becomes the mother, he does not assume Kali's great style. He is a typically "good" mother complaining helplessly to "her" husband, Giri. Ramprasad-as-mother does not claim for himself, even in poetic role-playing, the power of Kali, the Mother.

What emerges now is an interesting contradiction in Ramprasad's own posture: he is a demanding, adamant, and fearless one even while being aware of his helplessness.

Prasād says: find a half-wit  
And fool him if You want,  
But if You don't save me  
I'm going to get Shiva to spank You.  
(1982, 34)

And if You aren't loving, why shouldn't I go  
To Stepmother and if she takes me up  
You won't see me around here anymore.  
(1982, 29)

Ramprasad, the child, is as much a paradox as Kali herself. He is secure and strangely empowered even in the realization of his utter helplessness and complete dependence.

Thus Ramprasad's *Kali-bhakti* is an effusion of paradoxes. The object of worship, Kali, signifies the apparent contradictions of Life and Death; the worshiper, child-Ramprasad, is an exemplification of the opposites of helpless-

ness and confidence; and the very act of worship, *bhakti*, is a mixture of love and hate. What purpose can such a phenomenon, an intensely ambivalent and intimate relationship between such a child and such a Mother, serve?

V: THE "MOTHER"-CHILD" NEXUS:  
REDEMPTION, SPIRITUAL AND EARTHLY

Let us begin with the spiritual, where specifying a utilitarian motive for devotion is very much in order in the genre under consideration. Over and over again, the one thing that leaps out in Ramprasad's verses is the experience of mortality or the inevitability of death. Ramprasad's search for Kali is frankly because of this.

Pitying Mother, do I worship You  
Out of my own free will?  
Nobody would  
If it weren't for the terror  
Of death.  
(1982, 21)

Or in a less ironical and a more plaintive vein:

The fisherman has cast his net  
And sits there waiting, waiting.  
What will become of me,  
Mother, in this world?  
.  
.  
.  
.  
.  
.  
.  
Rāmprasād says: Call the Mother,  
She can handle Death.  
(1982, 33)

The Mother is an object of adoration because it is believed that she can "handle Death" or (as in the earlier poem) help us handle the "terror of Death." But Kali, we saw, is Death. So Ramprasad ends up craving a proximity to that which he dreads the most. Two distinct responses that trade on the difference between overcoming the "terror of death" and overcoming "death itself" are forthcoming to dissolve the apparent paradox here. They give us alternative conceptions of what spiritual liberation attained through *Kali-bhakti* is. Both interpretations occur in the tradition but are very often not kept distinct.

According to the first, confrontation is a strategy for overcoming our fear. For example, I may not face the fact that I need surgery because of my fear of the anticipated pain. When I come to accept the necessity of surgery, what I feared, i.e., the anticipated pain, does not disappear: This acceptance just enables me to get on with life in spite of the pain. What I have overcome, then,

is not the pain of surgery but only my crippling fear of that pain. In a similar vein, acceptance of Kali can be a confrontation of what I fear most—inevitable death. Such acceptance is not an overcoming of death but only of my fear of it. “Through self-surrender (*Prapatti*) he (Ramprasad) loses his *fear of death* of self, which is all death really is” (Kinsley 1975, 119, *emphasis mine*).

Prasād says: I don’t know what  
Its all about, so do what You have to.  
But shake me loose from this fear of death.  
(1982, 48)

A snake afraid of a frog?—What rubbish!  
Can you, your Mother’s son, fear Death?  
You’re mad—is anyone whose mother  
Is the Mother be afraid of Death?  
(1982, 53)

Spiritual liberation through Kali-worship, according to this first interpretation, is a state of fearlessness (about mortality) that enables us to live life even as it comes mixed with death and decay. Call this “liberative fearlessness.”

Alternatively, longing for Kali may be seen as a desire for immortality or a longing to overcome death itself. Liberation now consists in realizing that

. . . you end, brother,  
Where you began, a reflection  
Rising in water, mixing with water,  
Finally one with water.  
(1982, 20)<sup>28</sup>

The I, a mere “reflection,” is the psycho-physical organism that dies. But what remains, “the water,” is eternal and deathless. In realizing that I am not this necessarily-decaying, psycho-physical organism, I grasp my own hidden immortality. Embracing Kali as Death is a gesture of embracing the inevitable annihilation of the psycho-physical organism and clearing the way, as it were, for the “mixing” of the ego in the Infinite. “Kālī confronts one with a vision of the world as chaotic and out of control and thereby urges one to see beyond it to what is permanent and eternal. In this sense, Kālī is both the embodiment or mistress of this ephemeral, magically created world and the stimulus to resolve to transcend it” (Kinsley 1975, 136). The state of spiritual liberation, in this second interpretation, is a transcendence of empirical selfhood, of realizing that what dies is really not one’s true self. It is understanding one’s deathlessness and thereby overcoming death itself. Call this “transcendent liberation.”<sup>29</sup>

The stage is now set for our final question: How can either “liberative fear-

lessness" or "transcendent liberation" (in other words, what a devotee aspires for through *Kali-bhakti*) be relevant in struggles against oppression? A criticism voiced in section I rears its head here: Spirituality and politics seem to fall apart on either of these two construals of the spiritual goal. "Transcendent liberation" is an overcoming of death achieved through transcendence of the empirical. This is virtually a *going beyond* the political rather than an engagement with it. Alternatively, "liberative fearlessness," which is overcoming the fear of death, avoids an other-worldly leap, no doubt, but does not seem to underscore any kind of responsible political action. The fear of death, along with the Hindu belief in *karma* and rebirth, serves as an impetus to be moral. If future incarnations are shaped by karmic influences acquired in the present life, then our impending death gives an urgency to being good. In this context, an overcoming of the fear of death, a forgetfulness about it, might well induce a carefreeness which, in turn, could very well push us into moral and political irresponsibility—the life of crude and uncommitted hedonists living only for the moment.<sup>30</sup> In this mode, Ramprasad would be quite consistent in taking as he says,

... these few things—  
The sort Shiva carries<sup>31</sup>—and singing:  
"Hurrah for Kālī," (I'll) just dance off.  
(1982, 39)

The following depiction of salvation by David Kinsley echoes just this possibility: "To accept one's mortality," he says, "is to be able to act superfluously, to let go, to be able to sing, dance, and shout. To win Kali's boon is to become childlike, to be flexible, open, and naive like a child. It is to act and be like Ramakrishna, who delighted in the world as Kali's play, who acted without calculation and behaved like a fool or a child." (1975, 145). Thus the critic constructs the following destructive dilemma: *Kali-bhakti* either leads to a straightforward transcendence of the social order (in "transcendent liberation") and hence to a transcendence of socio-political consequences altogether; or its effect on us (in "liberative fearlessness") is to make us naive (like a *fool* / *child*) and to suggest a life of irresponsibility rather than the stuff that politics is made of. On neither interpretation, then, is *Kali-bhakti* socially efficacious.

In order to respond to this let us step back for a moment to a diagnosis of exploitative relationships. According to Val Plumwood (1993), self-other relationships (oppressive or not) flow from the structure of self-identity. It has often been emphasized that a self defined in terms of Reason (which in turn is conceived in opposition to, and as higher than, the domain of the non-rational) is bound to have an exploitative "master-identity." The archetypical "other" to reason is of course nature, whose comparative inferiority is variously conceptualized as lower than Reason (in the Platonic context), as inert,

mechanical, and devoid of teleology (in the mechanistic philosophy fuelled by Descartes and the Enlightenment), or as private property that can be “owned” and hence unabashedly appropriated by the self (in the liberal and contemporary context of capitalism). Whatever (or whoever) is associated with nature—women, indigenous cultures, emotionality, sexuality—is consequently perceived as being in need of control and ultimately is appropriated and owned. In this way, pervasive and widespread forms of domination are generated. Plumwood ultimately traces the construction of such a domineering self-identity to Western man’s response to death. The problem, according to Plumwood, stems from a fear of mortality and the failure to acknowledge that life and death are intertwined. In an attempt to overcome death, man—as far back as Plato—has sought self-definitions in forms that deny his embeddedness and necessary dependence on nature (the realm of decay and death). The Platonic move to transcend the “prison of the body,” the Cartesian search for “pure rational objectivity” to make nature transparent, and, finally, contemporary man’s insatiable desire for “private property and consumption” are all attempts at attaining immortality and personal continuity while denying our necessary dependence on Death/Nature.

What is important is that, in this analysis, a solution to exploitation would obviously lie in an alternative self-construction. And “any attempt to rework the Western tradition’s account of human identity and its relations to nature must confront the anti-life themes implicit in its major traditions of death” (Plumwood 1993, 102). Ramprasad’s *Kali-bhakti* becomes promising at this point because it encapsulates, as we have seen, the drama of his confronting Death. The wisdom in the symbolism of Kali is that *life and death are intertwined*. An acceptance of Kali is an acceptance of Death which is concomitant with Life. It is the realization that any attempt to defy Death amounts to denying Life itself. But does such Life/Death-acceptance (through acceptance of Kali) lead to a genuinely different self-construction not modelled on the master-identity? Is there really a radically different picture of the self, and hence of interpersonal relationship, lurking in *Kali-bhakti*? Or are we reading too much into it?

The mother-child nexus of Ramprasad’s devotional lyrics can actually serve as a rich motif for both methodological and substantial changes. While ordinary conceptions of motherhood do not suggest an alternative self-construction, the dynamic between child-Ramprasad and Mother-Kali can do so in substantial ways. Methodologically, the child-mother motif underscores the importance of the personal, the private, and the particular over the abstract universalism of rationalism. Hence, if the argument here works, an archetypal instance from the “private” domain—the mother-child bond—would represent self-identity relevant for the “public” sphere. But let us see if this can be made more plausible through the following claims.

### A. THE ONTOLOGICAL

Ramprasad's Kali is a mother who is not denied assertiveness. The danger of the mother losing herself in her cared-for is expertly avoided by Kali. We have not only a Mother who is not self-sacrificing, but we are also faced with an assertive and demanding child. Yet, this not is a bond between "equals" but a bond articulated by one who is irrevocably dependent and aware of his dependence on an immensely more powerful other. However, Ramprasad's indebtedness to and dependence on Kali does not lead to his enslavement. The weaker individual in the relationship makes claims and demands of the more powerful one, who, even while discharging her responsibility, does not turn into a self-effacing martyr. Let us remember that Ramprasad's chosen metaphor for the Divine-human bond is that of Mother-child and not that of Beloved-lover (as in some other *bhakti*-saints). While it is understandable for a lover to desire union with his or her beloved, it is more usual for a child to fight his Mother—to crave her proximity even while struggling for independence. So the child-mother motif of Ramprasad's *Kali-bhakti* clearly points to an interrelatedness between different centers of interest conscious of this difference and continually negotiating an optimally beneficial nexus in which none is effaced or sacrificed. In fact, each is committed to the welfare of the other and in turn is assured of the other's concern for her. Kali's whimsicality is a constant reminder of her autonomy so that her children do not appropriate her completely as care-giver. Child-Ramprasad's demands, on the other hand, serve as a reminder of the existence of "another" that Kali must, and ultimately does, take into account. We clearly avoid here a dysfunctional dualism that impels us to negate and assimilate genuine others into our projects. In stark contrast to the "master-identity," Ramprasad's metaphor signifies a "relational identity" that may well curb the excesses of the domineering self.

### B. THE ETHICAL

The balance achieved between child-Ramprasad and Kali also suggests a revised moral terrain that breaks down the usual egoism-altruism divide. Kali, as we have seen, is not denied the competitiveness and self-assertiveness generally associated with a self-serving egoism. Yet, she is Ramprasad's Savior and looks to his interests as is required by a self-sacrificing altruism. Kali is thus both self-serving and other-serving at once. What is more, her altruism is not based on any exchange or contract. The strange Mother in question has not earned Ramprasad's devotion in any way—in fact, she seems to have done enough *not* to deserve it. Similarly, the child-Ramprasad's confidence that he will be acknowledged also comes not from the fact that he has done anything to deserve the Mother's attention (other than simply love and depend on her), but from the fact that it is her nature to attend to his needs, albeit in her inscrutable way. For example:

Rāmprasād says: In this game  
 The end was a foregone conclusion  
 Now, at dusk, take up Your child  
 In Your arms and go home.  
 (1982, 23, emphasis mine)

The “child,” through all his chiding and chaffing, is bound unconditionally to the “Mother,” who, in spite of all her eccentricity, does take care of him when all is said and done. What transpires is community not based on prudential curtailment of self-interest: Kali’s taking care of Ramprasād is continuous with her self-assertion and Ramprasād’s outbursts against Kali’s waywardness might be prompted by his care and concern for *her*. What we have here, then, is a notion of serving interests of others as part of our own self-interests. The common good becomes a responsibility that each individual discharges in the formation of his or her “relational self.” And the ground of such responsibility lies in what we are: essentially connected beings.

#### C. THE ENVIRONMENTAL

The above ontological and ethical consequences have very important implications for environmental philosophy. Remember that one of the significances of Kali is *prakṛti*, or nature. A relational self modelled in and through a dialogue with Kali-as-nature thus becomes an ecological self. The “water” we, as droplets, come out of and the water we go back to is the deep blue ocean of Kali—the primordial Nature (*Prakṛti*). Our relation to the natural realm is intrinsic to who and what we are. This is not a holistic absorption of ourselves in nature. Rather, we have a self-construction that recognizes its embeddedness in the natural and yet does not shy away from asserting interests that are sometimes antithetical to that of nature. Similarly, nature too can sometimes be hostile and uncaring of our wants. Growth consists in negotiating these differences, in sometimes even using nature, but with a full awareness of our intrinsic relation to her and nature’s own (sometimes opaque to us) teleology. Environmental ethics becomes not a simple extensionist or utilitarian move where we curb exploitative tendencies for our own long-term interests. Rather, it is grounded in an indebtedness to and acknowledgment of embeddedness in nature that makes responsibility to care for it natural.

#### D. THE SOCIAL

The motif of Ramprasād’s *Kali-bhakti* contains the seeds of a selfhood that is not dependent on possessions and is not consumed by greed. Look at Ramprasād’s suggestions for an aspiring devotee:

“I’m this. This is mine.”  
 Idiot thoughts.

O Mind, you imagined all that stuff was real  
 And carelessly tangled the heart!  
 "Who am I? Who is mine?  
 Who else is real?"

. . . . .  
 O Mind, the light in a dark room  
 Is snuffed by possessions.

. . . . .  
 Rāmprasād says:  
 Lift the mosquito net and look at yourself.  
 (1982, 44)

"Looking at myself" is looking at my mortality. And really to *look* at mortality is to understand the futility of acquisitiveness, to grasp the "idiocy" of possessiveness, of claiming things and persons as "mine." Developing this further, Ramprasād says:

The bee's blunder when it goes for  
 The painted version of the lotus.  
 You've given me bitter leaves,  
 Swearing they were sweet, and my old  
 Sweet tooth has cost me a whole day  
 Spitting the bitterness out.  
 Mother, You lured me into this world,  
 You said: "Let's play," only to cheat  
 My hope out of its hope with Your playing.  
 (1982, 23)

The key idea here is the end of hope in the salvific powers of "commodities." But this naturally signals the end of "grasping," of overconsumption, of selfishness—the girdle of severed hands around Kali's waist. Giving up the quest for "possessions" and property is the deconstruction of the economic self which, as mentioned earlier, is the modern incarnation of the "master identity." The basic idea is that a self that does not want to possess for oneself is a self that does not need to appropriate, exploit, or oppress others, and, of course, is also one that does not fear loss. What emerges is really a counter to the classic picture of liberal man who is a "person" only to the extent that he has property and the freedom to enjoy wealth as he chooses or contracts to do.

What we are moving towards is a rejection of the second horn of the critic's dilemma noted earlier. Recall that "transcendent liberation" was said to lead to a transcendence of ethics and politics (by collapsing all differences), while "liberative fearlessness" led to the undermining of political life (by advocating a life of an irresponsible child or fool). But once we note how deep rooted the liberal notion of personhood is, we see why its rejection can be

perceived as naive and akin to the behavior of a fool. Actually, the devotee, in “acting like a child,” is really enacting an alternative model of self-hood. The motif of the child has suggested to some critics the rejection of manliness and a regression to the “spiritual clutching of the babe.”<sup>32</sup> Read positively, however, it is a new construction of subjectivity and a new vision of freedom. “Liberative fearlessness,” then, holds the key to an alternative social order by implying a new metaphysics of self. Ramprasad’s mother-child motif is not a model of discrete centers of interests (at best) working out a contract for maximization of individual freedom. It is a system of interdependencies, of mutual indebtedness and responsibility dancing the cosmic dance of Life/Death. And this model is constitutive of the spiritual salvation that Ramprasad envisages in and through his poetry.

To sum up: What the devotee strives for is “liberative fearlessness.” Spiritual practice is about overcoming greed and about restraining the drive to accumulate material possessions. It is giving up the constraints and pretensions of an “adult” lifestyle and coming close to the “foolish” playfulness of childhood. This undermining of economic individuality does not entail a negation of metaphysical individuality (or plurality) but is a crucial step in deconstructing exploitative social systems that are kept in place by defensive reactions to our imminent mortality.

## VI: SOME OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

The relevance of spiritual life for liberatory agendas through the notion of “liberative fearlessness” is not without its problems. A concept of relational self culled from Ramprasad’s *bhakti* seems to sit uncomfortably with the metaphysical context of his devotion. It appears to undermine the very possibility of “transcendent liberation” which, after all, does find expression in his poetry. Note that “transcendent liberation” is nothing but a dissipation of the individual / empirical ego and its final subsumption in the Infinite. Hence, it is a quest for the destruction of metaphysical individuality—not just of economic individuality, as argued in the previous section. Any attempt, therefore, to construe the devotionism under question as a metaphor for the construction of *individuated self-identities* (no matter how “relationally” conceived) is utterly wrong-headed as long as “transcendent liberation” is part of the complete context of *Kali-bhakti*. For better or for worse, Ramprasad’s spirituality seems to entail the kind of transcendence that belies any ethics or politics. In different, but in no uncertain terms, it remains a denial of ordinary life as much as of Plato.

Ignoring scholarship about the possibility of *bhakti* within a dualistic ontology and even setting aside the debate over whether Ramprasad’s own ontology is dualist or monist, I would like to concede here the metaphysical monism of Ramprasad’s spirituality and the significance of “transcendent liberation,”

while adhering at the same time to the formation of a relational self as its ethico-political message. This move relies on considering the two interpretations of spiritual redemption ("transcendent liberation" and "liberative fearlessness") not as discrete alternatives but as interrelated to constitute a more textured and complex notion of devotional life.

To the extent that spirituality is a practice and something to be engaged in, it assumes the reality of effort, action, and failure—all of which, in turn, require the reality of the self (and of other selves). Thus, in a sense, "transcendent liberation" cannot be involved in the *practice* of spirituality because it entails a dissolution of the concepts of effort and action through the ultimate dissolution of the psycho-physical self. But, undeniably, it is the ultimate *end* of spiritual training and what the devotee hopes for. However, to hope for something is not necessarily to aim at it, and, in fact, we sometimes hope for that which we cannot aim at. In the Kantian system, for example, it is hoped that ultimate happiness will be granted to the virtuous; yet a moral person is not supposed to do her duties *for the sake of* happiness, and, in fact, is not moral if she does so. By aiming at doing duty simply for the sake of duty, we become worthy of happiness which might be granted by God.<sup>33</sup> Thus "transcendent liberation" is only what the devotee *hopes* will be the result of his or her spiritual quest. It is the *telos* of spiritual life. However, it would be self-defeating to *aim* for it directly. What the devotee *can* attempt to do is to restructure her life and projects according to the less grandiose "liberative fearlessness." Constituting a relational self and deconstructing egotistical individuality is something which can be aimed at and consciously strived for. By achieving this, the devotee might become actually worthy of being led to a metaphysical monism through grace. Thus even if transcendence is the rationale of a spiritual life, it can be obtained only through the ethico-politically sensitive "fearlessness."

Such intertwining of "liberative fearlessness" and "transcendent liberation" makes excellence in ethics an integral part of being spiritual. This leads us to a non-dualistic understanding of the phenomena of spirituality itself. We are usually inclined to take the spiritual realm as sharply distinct from and beyond the "ordinary" moral realm. But on our reading of Ramprasad's devotionism, to be (ethically) "good"—and sometimes even "bad"—in very ordinary senses is to be spiritual. Given the centrality of the ethico-political in spiritual life, I wonder now whether the tables might not be turned. In other words, could we say that the other-worldly promise of a monistic bliss—a concept of "transcendent liberation"—is really in the service of the more empirically grounded peace of "liberative fearlessness"? Maybe the purpose of a spirituality non-dualistically conceived is excellence in interpersonal relationships, and the hope of a transcendent bliss is simply a Regulative Ideal to encourage our ethico-political struggles.

Whether or not we want to go this far, it is because of this dynamic between the empirical and the transcendent that the *bhakti* poetry which we have

examined has feminist relevance in spite of the metaphysically esoteric and world-denying strands within it. And it is also because of this that it is a little off-track to quote “eastern spirituality” as a transcendence of all duality. Certainly, Ramprasad’s spirituality can provide us with an antidote for patriarchal thinking, but only because it has an internal complexity. Instead of the “two,” it gives us “many-in-relation.” At the core of such spirituality lies not just a logic but a deviant logic of interrelationship. And it is this logic within spiritual experience that holds out hope for more just social interactions. For Ramprasad, spiritual redemption seems continuous with political redemption. *Kali-bhakti*, thus, can be a symbol for both. As

Prasād says: On Kālī’s tree  
 Goodness, wealth, love and release<sup>34</sup>  
 Can be had for the picking.  
 (1982, 59)

But note that “goodness, wealth, love,” on the one hand, and “release,” on the other, are radically different species of fruit.

## NOTES

I am grateful to Lynda Sexson, Arindam Chakrabarti, Christopher Chapple, and the referees and editors of *Hypatia* for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. All the verses cited here were written in Bengali by Ramprasad Sen and translated by Leonard Nathan and Clinton Seely (1982). The references are to this anthology. I also note the places where I have changed the translations a bit to capture the original better. Translation modified by one word here.

2. See, for example, Irene Javors (1990); Rachel Fell McDermott (1996); Lina Gupta (1991); Rita M. Gross (1983); C. Mackenzie Brown (1983); and Barbara G. Walker (1985).

3. *Bhakti* is an expression of devotion in a direct, personal, and experiential communication with the divine. This can take widely divergent forms. Such contextualization of Kali guards against what Greta Gaard calls “cultural cannibalism” (1993).

4. See Sumit Sarkar (1993).

5. It should be noted here that Kali is a Goddess in the Hindu pantheon and the popularity of Ramprasad’s songs falls within a broadly Hindu devotional context. However, Kazi Nazrul Islam, a very popular *Islamic* poet of Bengali, has also written on Kali (1968). The very intriguing and complex issues of Kali’s apparent travels to and within theological worlds other than her own will not be explored here.

6. Mythologically, the Goddess is the daughter of the mountains—the Himalayas.

7. See Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1998).

8. For the complexities here, see, for example, Kumkum Sangari (1990).

9. See Jashodhara Bagchi (1990).

10. See, for example, Tanika Sarkar (1995) and Lisa Mckean (1996).

11. I am grateful to Ruth Vanita for this reference.

12. Once again note that, historically, Kali worship has not been restricted to the Hindus. Also, as Sarkar points out, even in Ramakrishna, who is a century after Ramprasad, "there is no developed sense of a sharply distinct 'Hindu' identity, let alone any political use of it. . . . Either out of innocence or deliberate choice, Ramakrishna represented a kind of protest against the creation of sectarian walls" (1993, 46). Of course, he adds that Ramakrishna's "catholicity *would soon come to be displayed* as a timeless essence of Hinduism" (1993, 46, emphasis mine), though this appropriation requires the mediation of other historical figures and events.

13. Translation altered.

14. See, for example, Kumkum Sangari (1990) and *Manushi* (Tenth Anniversary Issue, 1989).

15. See *Manushi* (1989).

16. This is a reference to the river Ganges (Ganga), who, the story goes, descended from the heavens on Siva's head so as not to rupture the Earth with the force of her descent.

17. Literally "full of food." The form of the Goddess through which she symbolizes plenitude of food.

18. See, for example, Sukumari Bhattacharji (1990).

19. See Brian K Smith (1989, 46–47) and Taittiriya Upanisad 1:7:1.

20. See Lina Gupta (1991) and Kinsley (1975).

21. For expositions of Tantra philosophy, see Arthur Avalon (Sir John Woodroffe) (1978), M. M. Gopinath Kaviraj (1990), and Kamalakara Mishra (1981).

22. Translation altered.

23. Also means "man."

24. The bisexuality implicit in this image has not been explored here.

25. See Sangari (1990).

26. "Giri" means "mountain" and signifies the Himalayas here. The Goddess is said to be the daughter of the mountain.

27. This is further corroborated by the life of the modern Saint Sri Ramakrishna, who oftentimes dressed as a woman.

28. Contrast this with

. . . and what's this salvation  
If it swallows the saved like water  
In water. Sugar I love  
But haven't the slightest desire  
To merge with sugar. (1982, 62)

29. I owe this terminology to Christopher Chapple.

30. The Carvaka school of philosophy in Classical India exemplifies this possibility. In some interpretations, the Carvakas were egoistical hedonists whose ethics of "eat, drink and be merry" was based on the acceptance of death as the inevitable end of life.

31. Shiva is an ascetic—someone who has renounced the world. Thus, the "sort of things" Shiva carries amounts to a begging bowl and a tiger-skin mat for meditation.

32. This phrase is by Heinrich Zimmer. Quoted in Kinsley (1975, 130).

33. This point is argued for in Arindam Chakrabarti (1988).

34. The word "release" signifies what we have termed here "transcendent liberation." It is the release from the cycle of birth-death which amounts to the transcendence of the psycho-physical self.

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