



## **From a Warrior to a Consort: A Study of the Representation of Goddess Kali in the *Devi Mahatmya* and the *Kalika Purana***

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The worship of the martial goddesses especially that of Durga and Kali, has been central to the belief system of Shaktism which is based on the celebration of the cosmic, feminine energy or 'Shakti.' Scholars of religion and cultural critics tend to interpret Kali within a binary spectrum of a radical/submissive, proto-feminist/patriarchal goddess. However, the plural, ambivalent and paradoxical nature of Kali's femininity challenge simplistic reading as her trajectory can be mapped across scriptural, visual, mythological, devotional and literary narratives. This paper purports to examine the portrayal of goddess Kali in the Hindu scriptural tradition with special reference to the *Devi Mahatmya* and the *Kalika Purana*, the two crucial scriptures that mark the textualization of Kali in the corpus of Hindu religious narratives. There is a remarkable shift in the textual representation of Kali in the concerned scriptures where the portrayal of Kali as an independent, demon devouring goddess in the *Devi Mahatmya* (a scripture composed around sixth century A.D.) is transformed into a domesticated version of Kali as the consort of Shiva in the *Kalika Purana*, which is a text composed

three centuries after the *Devi Mahatmya* around ninth century A.D. in ancient Kamrupa (Assam).

**KEYWORDS:**

Durga, Kali, Shaktism, Scripture, Tantrism, Transgression, Femininity.

This paper purports to examine the portrayal of goddess Kali in the Hindu scriptural tradition with special reference to the *Devi Mahatmya* and the *Kalika Purana*, the two crucial scriptures that mark the textualization of Kali in the corpus of Hindu religious narratives. There is a remarkable shift in the textual representation of Kali in the concerned scriptures where the portrayal of Kali as an independent, demon devouring goddess in the *Devi Mahatmya* (a scripture composed around sixth century A.D) is transformed into a domesticated version of Kali as the consort of Shiva in the *Kalika Purana*, which is a text composed three centuries after the *Devi Mahatmya* around ninth century A.D in ancient Kamrupa (Assam). But at the outset I would like to introduce the two texts in terms of their genre, authorship, their status and significance within the sacred domain of goddess worship in India.

The *Devi Mahatmya* (translated as *The Glory of The Goddess*) has emerged across the ages as a pan-Indian text, popularly known as *Durga Saptashati* (meaning the seven hundred verses of Durga) in the northern region of India, and also as *Candi* (which is another name for the warrior goddess Durga) in the eastern region especially in West Bengal and Assam. It is one of the early texts where Durga and Kali are depicted as the martial goddesses who are engaged in a violent battle against the demons in order to restore the celestial territory of the gods. Among all the mainstream goddess worshipping communities in India, the *Devi Mahatmya* is considered to be a seminal, sacred, Sanskritized text as it is often recited by Brahmin priests in temples and also in the everyday devotional and ritual practices of the Hindu household. For instance, on the invocation ceremony (“Moholoya”) of the Durga Puja in Bengal, it has become a

customary practice to broadcast Birendra Bhadra's selected recitation of the *Mahatmya* slokas across radio and television channels. In this regard Thomas. B. Coburn offers an insightful comment on the dual nature of the *Devi Mahatmya* as a scripture which demands on the one hand a systematic ritualistic recitation as well as a textual interpretation. This is evident from the availability of the scripture in different local editions that provide commentary on the slokas in vernacular languages. "It is a text to be understood as well as chanted", the oral and performative nature of the text are in fact more crucial than its status as a written scripture (Coburn 151). In fact the interpretation or exposition of the *Mahatmya* is carried out through the "media of action and festival life, rather than in the words of teaching and preaching" (Coburn 153). Yet again one can cite the case of the Durga Puja festival in Bengal and the "Navratra" (the nine days of worship) in Northern India where the *Mahatmya* or the *Saptashati* is read out in a highly regulated sacred space and in certain Hindu households it is usually kept inside the "pujaghar" or the "room of worship" and even the physical dislocation of the book is prohibited.

In consonance with the *Devi Mahatmya*, the *Kalikapurana* too has acquired a canonical status in the textual tradition of Shakti literature through its extensive documentation of myths, rituals and practices. But unlike the *Mahatmya*, it is not as readily available and accessible as a manual for everyday practices of worship. In fact, the rituals prescribed in the *Kalikapurana* are far more elaborate, unconventional and controversial on many grounds as evident in Chapter Sixty-Seven of the text that describes the manner of conducting human and animal sacrifice ("bali") for appeasing the goddess of the Kamakhya shrine in Kamrup (Assam). In terms of plot and narration the *Kalikapurana* (KP) has a wider canvas where the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva is given equal centrality along with the Shakti goddesses Durga, Kalika and Kamakhya.

B.N Shastri describes how the *Kalika-purana* occupies an important position as one of the eighteen upa-puranas (or the secondary -puranas) composed in order to

popularize the cult of Shakti and especially the worship of Goddess Kamakhya- a Shakti Goddess primarily worshipped in Assam (Shastri 5). Wendy Doniger states that the composition of the early *Puranas* coincides with the reign of the Gupta dynasty in ancient India starting from 320 C.E (Doniger 243). In terms of their history of composition the Puranas succeed the epic poems and are also distinguished from them. While the Hindu epics celebrate the martial prowess of mortal heroes, the Puranas glorify the power and supremacy of a particular deity (Dowson 254). Scholars claim that the vast body of Puranic literature were composed by a group of Sanskrit authors although it is difficult to locate the exact origins of their authorship.

David Kinsley in his historical analysis of Kali worship claims that the emergence of Kali as an independent deity in mainstream Shakti tradition is a consequence of a systematic textualization of Kali's mythology within the body of *puranic* literature (Kinsley 184). And this is where the *Devi Mahatmya* becomes a significant mythological sourcebook where Kali appears as a deity who participates in the heroic battle against the demons while assisting the martial goddess Durga or Chandika. *Devi Mahatmya* signals Kali's "debut, her official entrance into the Great Tradition of Hinduism" (Kinsley 186). "Great" tradition implies the high, elite, Sanskritized tradition of Hinduism as opposed to the so-called "little" or the folk/ tribal traditions (McDaniel 6). In this regard Doniger proposes that the *Devi Mahatmya* can be interpreted as a possible written compilation of many earlier texts about the goddess, either from "lost Sanskrit texts or from lost or never preserved vernacular sources in Magadha or Tamil" (Doniger 255).

Just as the *Devi Mahatmya* marks the first moment in the textualization of Kali, a succeeding treatise such as the *Kalika Purana* reflects how Kali's textual representation is marked by shifts and changes where she has been endowed with a more conventional as well as contradictory expressions of femininity through her association with Shiva. The significance of the conjugal motif is reiterated by Kinsley who claims that three critical factors over a period of time result in the transformation of Kali into an

independent deity--- “a growing Kali mythology that soon associated her with the god Shiva, her popularity in Tantrism, particularly the Hindu Vamacara Tantric tradition and the fervent devotion of a few Bengali saint poets” (Kinsley 189). The pairing of Shiva and Kali becomes the central theme and trope in the *Kalikapurana* which marks a radical departure from the portrayal of the blood thirsty Kali in the *Devi Mahatmya*. While Kinsley does not specifically mention the *Kalika purana* in his work, he does cite several other texts where the theme of conjugality is used to re-construct the figure of Kali. For instance, in the *Vamana Purana* (a scripture in praise of the dwarf incarnation of Vishnu) Parvati (Shiva’s wife) is called Kali because of her dark skin and who later creates Durga, while in the *Linga Purana* (one of the major Puranas that portrays Shiva as the central deity) Shiva assumes the form of a child in order to pacify Kali’s fury on the battlefield (Kinsley 193). In both these accounts we see how the figure of Kali has been domesticated and maternalized while Shiva becomes the moral agent who can control her transgressive disposition.

I would now like to draw attention to some of the episodes in the *Devi-Mahatmya* (*DM*) and the *Kalikapurana* (*KP*) in order to highlight the contrasting images of Kali. According to the *DM*, Durga was created out of the combined powers of the divine trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in order to defeat the demon Mahisasura. In that sense Durga’s militant heroism is not self-generated but she rather becomes a construct of the male gods who invoke her to reclaim their celestial territory and authority from the asura. The same text also narrates the origin of Goddess Kali where during the battle Durga (Ambika) creates a terrifying goddess named Kali to destroy the demons Chanda and Munda and henceforth would be worshipped as “Chamunda.” Kali’s unconventional femininity is highlighted throughout the narration, of how she emerges from Durga’s forehead with “frowning eye-brows”, wearing a “garland of human skulls” and “tiger’s skin as clothes” with a “flickering tongue” and “deep and reddened” eyes (214).

While Durga herself originates from the collective energy of the male gods yet she creates a new feminine power in the form of Kali thereby asserting her own agency and autonomy. However, the *DM* also presents a contrast between the two goddesses. While both Kali and Durga/Ambika are shown as martial Goddesses endowed with heroic prowess yet Kali seems to embody a more destructive and transgressive energy. For instance, we are told how during the battle with Mahisasura, Durga had beheaded many of the demons and the narrator uses the simile of “fire” to describe her valour- “Ambika...meted out destruction to the mammoth army of the demon’s in a moment, as fire does so to the great heaps of straws and logs of the woods” (136). But in the case of Kali the act of bloodshed reaches a moment of frenzy where-

She fell upon the army of the demons hurriedly, killed many great demons and devoured them all. She picked up elephants...the fighting persons with one hand and put them into Her mouth ( *Devi Mahatmya* 215-216).

The seventh chapter of the *Mahatmya* narrates the terrifying acts of Kali and constantly emphasizes on her act of devouring. The image of the blood-thirsty goddess henceforth becomes central to the myth of Kali. This is further highlighted in the eighth chapter where Kali once again intervenes in the battle in order to defeat the demon Raktabeeja. Raktabeeja had received a boon that whenever a drop of blood fell from his body, a new demon would be created from it. So during the fight his blood creates endless armies of asuras and in that moment of sheer crisis Durga invokes Kali’s assistance who steps forward to drink Raktabeeja’s blood and devour the demons. At this moment both Durga and Kali are shown in their complementary roles where Kali’s excessive power enables Durga to execute her own mission.

Though it is worth noting that the text of the *DM* deploys a frame narrative structure where the primary narrator, Markendeya, narrates the circumstances under which the saga of the goddesses gets to be told. He introduces the readers to the

secondary narrator of the text, the sage Medhas who recites the heroic episodes of Durga and Kali for the spiritual regeneration of his newly initiated two disciples- a king named Suratha who had been defeated by his enemies, and a merchant named Samadhi who had lost his wealth and was banished by his family. This framing device complicates the gender politics of the text as the figure of the goddess becomes a narrative and discursive construct of a male, Brahmin priest who in turn imparts this knowledge to his male disciples, the representative of a hierarchical and patriarchal social order.

Nevertheless, the *Devi-Mahatmya* depicts Kali comes across as a grotesque and violent warrior goddess. Unlike the *DM*, the textual representation of Kali in the *Kalikapurana* becomes more complex and multi-dimensional. It is worth noting that the *KP* associates Kali with Krishna who is one of the powerful incarnations of Vishnu as seen in the fortieth chapter of the text. During his battle with Krishna, Naraka who is the demonic king of Pragjyoitsha sees Kalika standing by the side of Krishna “with red face and red eyes, wearing sword and lance. She is accompanied by Kamakhya (*KP* 265). Kali is extolled as the supreme feminine power for she is “Mahamaya and the embodiment of the world, enchants Vishnu, Hari, the lord of the world” (*KP* 267). However in the subsequent chapters of the text Kali is depicted not as a warrior goddess but as the daughter of King Himalaya who is made to perform a severe penance in order to marry Shiva. The text uses the name Kali both for the dark warrior goddess as well as for Parvati or Uma who is Shiva’s life thereby conflating the two personae. She enacts the role of a conventional heroine in love who constantly yearns for a conjugal relationship with Shiva. For instance in Chapter 42 of the *KP* we are told how Kalika is made to transform herself according to the codes of purity laid down by Shiva. The narrator describes how “Girisa (Shiva) did not accept her for his wife because of the fact that her body was polluted by the semen that was poured into the womb of her mother” and Kali can purify herself only by observing penance for about eighteen thousand years (*KP* 278).

The narrative portrays Shiva in a position of moral superiority in relation to Kali as he becomes the agent of her transformation. Unlike in the *Devi Mahatmya* the martial aspect of Kali is undermined in the *KP* and the emphasis rather shifts towards her maternal role where the union of Shiva and Kali would lead to the birth of their son Skanda, who would then be assigned the task of killing the demon Tarakasura. Kali is defined through the feminine principle of procreation while Shiva is characterized as someone who can reconcile conjugal consummation with a sense of asceticism. The *KP* also includes a crucial episode where Kali transforms herself into a fair-skinned goddess Gauri when Shiva comments on her dark complexion in the presence of the nymph Urvashi. Being enraged Kali hides herself in the slope of a mountain and performs yet another hundred years of meditation (*KP* 307). While this particular version of Kali's humiliation appears in several other textual sources such as the *Vamana Purana* where Kali retaliates through her physical self- metamorphosis, the *KP* debunks Kali's autonomy and agency by offering narrative centrality to Shiva. According to the *KP* version, Shiva appears to Parvati/Kali during her meditation and on seeing his cosmic manifestation Parvati undergoes a feeling of remorse and then propitiates her husband to grant her a beautiful body. Shiva gets her bathed in the Akashi Ganga in order to fulfill his boon (*KP* 311).

The subservient image of Kali in the *KP* is in sharp contrast to the popular visual iconography where one sees the semi-naked, skull wearer and blood devouring Kali stepping on the body of her husband. The *KP* instead serves to humanize and demystify the transgressive figure of Kali where her autonomy is compromised by the conjugal and patriarchal strictures of Shiva. Kali/Parvati/Uma then fits into the stereotype of the ideal wife with her conventional feminine virtues of purity and chastity but also capable of expressing anger and jealousy. This is highlighted by the particular episode where Parvati/Kali sees her own reflection on Shiva's chest but misperceives it to be the image of some other woman that Shiva has possibly married (*KP* 313). Shiva then assures her of his fidelity and proves that the image on his chest



happens to be her own shadow. In most of these minor episodes the relationship between Shiva and Kali is often portrayed as a relationship between a mentor and a disciple where the latter is subject to the superior wisdom of the former. The *KP* also narrates the tale of Kali's androgyny when Shiva offers half of his body to Kali and after the union her body acquires a perfect symmetry with both masculine and feminine attributes complementing each other (*KP* 316).

However, there are sections in the *KP* where we find grotesque manifestations of Kali such as the Goddesses "Ugratara" and "Shivaduti" that are described elaborately in chapter Sixty One of the treatise. It describes the iconography of Ugratara as-

A devotee should meditate upon the Ugratara as having four arms, of dark complexion, adorned with a wreath of human heads....her right foot is on the chest of a corpse while the left one on the back of a lion, she herself constantly licks the corpse; she laughs shrilly, is always utterly horrible (*KP* 449).

From the above description, Ugratara clearly seems to be an unconventional Goddess in the manner of Soshan Kali (or the Kali of the cremation ground). The *KP* delineates Kali along similar lines of a Tantric goddess where she is identified with the imagery of death and sexuality. This specific manifestation of Kali completely debunks the conventional, ideal femininity of the mother goddesses such as Parvati, Lakshmi and Saraswati. As quoted in one of the verses- "This goddess gives excessive enjoyment in fulfilling lust and always removes stupidity. There is none equal to her in giving sexual enjoyment to the adept" (*KP* 451). Sexual energy as a theme becomes central to the cult of Kali worship especially in the Tantric mode of worship which is antithetical to the Brahmanical codes of religious practice. As Kinsley suggests, the reason behind Kali's centrality in Tantric worship might lie in the fact that she herself embodies certain transgressive and forbidden elements through her association with death, excessive appetite and terror (Kinsley 78). The tantric worshipper engages in a heroic

confrontation with Kali through a cluster of rituals and thereby assimilates, overcomes and transforms her into a vehicle of salvation (Kinsley 78). The heroism of Tantric worship is often contrasted with the submissive mode of Kali devotionism especially in the works of Bengali Shakta poets of the later ages.

The goddess Shivaduti is yet again depicted as a gruesome goddess who wears human heads, adorned with “snake earrings” and “snake necklace”, “she stands by putting her right foot on a corpse, while her left foot on the back of a jackal, and surrounded by hundreds of jackal” (KP 452). She is also accompanied by her twelve fearsome female companions or *yoginis* during the battle with demons (KP 453). Yet again the description of Shivaduti posits a sharp contrast to a familial and domesticated deity such as Uma. In the Bengali Hindu religious imagination, Mahisura-Mardini Durga is also worshipped as the daughter Uma who is believed to be visiting her parental home in the mortal world once in a year during the autumnal festival.

As a concluding remark, one can argue that the paradoxical nature of Kali’s femininity emerges within the vast body of the Hindu scriptural genre. While the *Devi-Mahatmya* proclaims Kali primarily as a warrior goddess, the later scriptures such as the *Kalika-purana* pluralize the myths of Kali and endow her with multi-dimensional, paradoxical and contradictory traits of femininity. As Shiva’s consort she is inscribed within a domestic ideology of wifhood and motherhood, and yet the scripture allows us to recover narratives of unconventional representations of Kali especially in her role as a Tantric goddess.

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**NOTES:**

### Timeline of the scriptures and epics –

1700-1500 B.C.E Nomads in the Panjab compose the *Rig Veda*.

1200-900 B.C.E The Vedic people compose the *Yajur, Sama and Atharva Veda*.

500-400 B.C.E- Early Upanishadas are composed.

300-100 B.C.E- Dharma sutras are composed.

300 B.C.E – 30 CE- *The Mahabharata* is composed

Around 450 CE- the early *Puranas* are composed.

650-800 CE- Early Tantras are composed.

**Purana:** In terms of their history of composition the Puranas succeed the epic poems and are also distinguished from them. While the Hindu epics celebrate the martial prowess of mortal heroes, the Puranas glorify the power and supremacy of a particular deity. Scholars often cite five distinguishing themes of the Puranas such as the creation and dissolution of the universe, the incarnation and genealogy of gods, the reign of kings, and the legends of future lineages.

**Mahapurana and Upapurana-** According to scholars, there are eighteen Primary or Mahapuranas, and eighteen Secondary or Upapuranas. The Primary puranas are sectarian texts where a particular cluster of texts revolve around a primary deity from among the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. For instance, Vishnu, Bhagabata, Naradiya Puranas extol Vishnu; Linga, Shiva, Skanda Puranas praise Shiva; while Brahma, Markandeya and Vamana Purana celebrate Brahma. The “Upapuranas” include texts such as *Aditya, Varuna, Kalika, Manava, Kapila Purana* and so on.

**Devi-Mahatmya :** This scripture is found inserted in the *Markendeya-purana*, though it now stands as a separate and complete composition. Thomas B. Coburn argues that the *Devi-Mahatmya* cannot be considered to be a typical Puranic text because unlike most Puranic texts, it has a high degree of textual integrity.

**Kamakhya Temple:** Situated on the Nilachal hill in the western part of the Guwahati city in Assam, it is one of the popular Hindu temples in India dedicated to the cult of the mother goddess Kamakhya and her several manifestations. It is considered to be one of the crucial site for the practice of Tantric worship.

**Tantra:** As religious treatises, they are usually in the form of a dialogue between Shiva and his consort Shakti. They advocate an esoteric spiritual discipline which worships the divine goddess through the practice of rituals, mantras (chanting) and yantras (sacred diagrams). The Tantric worshippers of the goddess have been divided into two distinct classes - the "Dakshinacharis" or the "right handed" sect who engage in a more moderate form of worship in contrast to the "Vamacharis" or the "left-handed" sect whose rituals involve the use of forbidden elements such as meat, fish, alcohol, parched grain and sexual intercourse.

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