

Global Transactions : Recasting the Kali

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American Studies for the last two decades has focused on notions of hybridity and the voice of the marginalised. Re-emergence of the coloniser-colonised relationship in an era of globalisation has now fostered the creation of a reverse moment of dehybridisation, provincialisation and ontologised differences that transcodes and overcodes the East in the global supermarket. Such an approach involves a dehybridisation of Kali by means of deciphering the transcoded messages that has come of age as a part of 'recognised western culture' in the form of convergences such as 'Goddess Kali Lunch Boxes', 'Tantric sex weekends' and in the form of divergence as in television serials like Xena, Warrior Princess, evoking protests from scholars of Hindu tradition. Although one does see a cross-fertilisation of the idea of Kali, it sounds more like an a priori convergence of oriental difference with the West in futuristic semantic of convergence. The recent reporting of the media on the issue of Heidi Klum dressing up as Kali at her annual Halloween party has added more complexities on a marketing and circulation of the Kali symbol. The convergence assumes 'nature' in the form of essentialisation and 'culture' in the form of one's organic and immutable givenness that need to be preserved against the chaos of cross-hatching, promiscuous sharing, and mixing. Such an idea of convergence goes along with the preservation of an absolute territory of dominance based upon strict and universal specificity of the superior from the weaker in a global clash of civilisations. In contemporary global world electronic mediation seems to deterritorialize imagination and creates specific irregularities because both viewers and images are in simultaneous circulation. Neither images such as Kali nor viewers/

devotees fit into circuits or audiences that are easily bound within local, national or regional spaces. The unpredictable relation between peoples and images, both in a state of flux are always in a contestation in which individuals and groups seek to transform the global into their own local practices. Scholars like Arjun Appadurai have theorized on how the work of imagination is transformed through everyday cultural practices. Globalization has shifted key relations between producers and consumers, broken many links between the worshipper and the worshipped and obscured lines between temporary locales and imaginary social attachments.¹ Due to the complexity involved in the interface between global imagination and local rituals, cultural and religious symbols have undergone an inversion. It has been stated that the most valuable feature of culture particularly in a globalized sense is the concept of difference. Therefore, religious practice or political ideology, in a cultural sense, need to address the issue of difference that an object has in relation to its *other*. Stressing the dimension of culture and its implication in a cultural transaction permits a re-thinking of culture less as a property of individuals and groups and more as a device to discuss difference and otherness.

A cross-cultural understanding at this moment of clash is a tool for establishing what Marx had characterised as a social relation between the fetishised form of value and the world of commodity² in which Kali appears as a powerful popular imagery. Such a popular imagery requires a distinction between the free play of creative imagination of Kali from the play of predication of tantric, mystic and terroristic and so on, established through the marketisation of tradition. A circulation of Kali image in the global supermarket requires the temporal a priori of its cosmopolitan bracketing that suppresses its otherness and gives it a standardised discursive label of diasporic, feminist, New age and so on in the idiom of post-pluralist Western cultural studies. What is ironical in this whole project of displaying the locations of "Kali in the margins, at the centre and in the West" is not a politics of location, as Homi Bhabha would have called it; but a politics of a determinate centring that stands out over and against its own indigenous cultural location. Such a configured

Kali produces simulacra through its global presence that exists as an analogy or supplement of its own location, a floating signifier, a false other. What stands in contrast to this mirror-play of location now arises only after representation that does not stand in contrast to its ontology, rather it appears to govern its own image. One could draw 'a kind of radical response to those many limit-situations of human experience' in such simulacral forms of Kali 'encountered' by an equally diverse stock of people in the global world. Such multiplied visions of Kali break down into noumena that allow a mirror play of locations in order to reproduce the cross-cultural dehybridisation of representations: a reverse encounter with Kali from the standard and symptomatically global position of 'limits of reason'. Such an encounter is reverse as it reverts Kali to a repristinisation, only after it is represented through the concrete 'reflecting religion'. Such an encounter is reverse as it happens only after the east has recuperated itself from being Europe's other by locating a space for itself. Ironically enough such a space of one's own is now open to a mirror play in the dialogic discourse of reason and truth and thereby allowing the West to encounter it as an other in an exchange where Kali as a cultural symbol exchanges its own space with the space of cultural market provided by the West.

How does such an exchange take place? As Derrida contends prosthetics as the mode of othering,³ the Western discourse of Kali takes it in all its manifest forms without exception. This establishes the exceptional and extraordinary paradigm of symbolic reality of Kali that presents itself here and now so that the search for various interpretations and significations go on. This is precisely an act of historicisation of Kali through its forms of representation that creates its own narrative of meaning and truth. Such historicisation of Kali foregrounds a possibility of adding value to its already existing exterior with a discourse derived from some of its cultural roots. This is a kind of historicisation with a strategy of de-territorialisation.⁴ This mode of western historicisation of Kali overcomes the cultural distance by an as-if-true and authentic, euphemistically called, 'cross-cultural understanding' of those derivative discourses so that she

comes from the margin to the centre and to the west. A recasting of the Kali as a global cultural symbol brings Kali within its textual horizon, the limits of which are unwittingly drawn around a radical mixing of her femininity with the religiosity of one who is possessed with the goddess. Kali, as a mimetic representation unsettles the core Western cultural discourse of comparative religion as an analogical discourse that effaces the trace of the *other*.⁵

An inquiry into the possible causes behind the publication and marketing of critical texts like David Kinsley's *The Sword and The Flute: Kali & Krsna* and *Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*, Rachel Fell McDermott's *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*, David Arthur Walters' "Kali Comes to America" from his *The Rape Of Kali*, Jeffrey Kirpal's *The Kali's Child*, all particularly produced by western scholars reveal various texts and contexts of South Asia which have contributed to the re-emergence of the Kali symbol in Western settings and discourses creating a clear backdrop for an east-west encounter. Songs, poetry and rituals particularly centring round the Kali image portray that rituals are not the only expression that Kali liberates, empowers and challenges. Some message comes in art forms-dance, theatre, painting and advertising. How to read the increasingly western and idiosyncratic interest in the Kali figure particularly by western scholars is a matter of critical inquiry. Of course, the fascination with things eastern can be traced back to the nineteenth century with Transcendents, the Theosophists and the Spiritualists and into the early 20th century through the writings of William James and the appreciation in the West of the messages of Swami Vivekananda and Paramhansa Yogananda. This has been strengthened by the ever increasing influence of South Asians in U.S. Given the decentralized, universal and pluralistic character of the internet one gets new and competing voices on the subject of Kali. As a democratizing and socially dis-embedding mass medium which is free from social constraints of caste and specialized mediation, it has allowed goddess worship to be unlinked from roots. For example Walter mentions:

Westerners have long been fascinated by Hinduism, a religious sort of

umbrella over diverse cults. Westerners have adopted many of the Hindu traditions, often unwittingly because of the influence of highly educated Western men and women. Yet the worship of Kali, who is revered in India despite her terrifying aspects, is rather rare in the West, especially in modern America. Westerners received an inkling of Kali from Swami Vivekananda, who became very popular in America after his 1893 appearance at the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago. (86)

Again Hugh B Urban states:

The figure of Kali, it would seem lies at a critical fulcrum between colonial and anti-colonial imagination emerging out of a dynamic process of mimicry, mirroring and counter-mirroring. (119)

He discusses how Kali continues to appear throughout literature and cinema—for example in *Gunga Din*, in the Beatles' *Help*, and in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.

Again, Rachel Fell McDermot's recalls seeing a picture of Kali in *Tantra: The Magazine* (Kali Issue No. 9 1994:41) which for several years was devoted to understanding of 'Tantra' in contemporary America. She also states how after undertaking a project on Kali she studied how the Hindu goddess became a model. Thus, Kali as the mother goddess appears as a source of visible and invisible character of post-colonial fantasy presented through how the goddess, the mother signifier is venerated across spaces of ritual and war ranging from Kalighat to Varanasi to the LTTE-dominated north-eastern Sri Lanka. Kali's existence is made ontologically contingent upon the pristine form of 'tests' that Kali signifies in order to break through the father-daughter and husband-wife relationship. Such an ontology of Kali gets multiplied in the ideological changes of Kali: from a tantric goddess to her 'Vaisnavite' incarnation in Kalighat; from a demon destructive tantric icon to an apologetic Kali ashamed of transgression of the patriarchal order; from a stereotypical goddess of war and terror to a goddess with oracular powers in healing the victims of state repression; from a fierce, transgressive aghora goddess to a subject of 'participiant observation' in Varanasi (Banaras). In fact, the presence of Kali is narrativised to produce continuity between discrete notions of Kali featured between Kalighat and Varanasi on the one hand and

the West on the other. In the light of Western enlightenment and canons of representing the *other* in Western anthropology, Kali is looked upon as mystic and uncanny to the extent that her 'image' simultaneously detaches itself from the root and re-attaches itself to the dehybridised predicates of her Western representation. It is only after the representation of Kali in a concrete modality of femininity and religiosity, that there is a return to the roots, 'tantric', 'vaishnavite' and 'ghora' and so on. This is how a represented Kali as a simulacra of her own attributes 'encounters' her own roots and in the process gets engaged in a double movement of detachment and attachment to the logos, to its mythic and puranic origins. This return to roots re-employs selective aspects of the antecedent Oriental discourse of Kali as it is transmitted to the west.⁶

This double movement of Kali is a movement from Kali as a pre-capitalist symbol to market-determined mythologisation of Kali icon on the one hand and a movement from a patricidal maternal presence to carnage of the mother herself in the symbolic exchange between the East and the West on the other. Kali as a global symbol celebrates the maternal figure of Kali of the east to enact the existence of the maternal as the other within the self-representation of the West, while it re-enacts the more fundamental matricide⁷ that could be deciphered within the self-presentation of eastern cultures. This movement from patricide to matricide through self-representation of a perspective constitutes Kali as a performative medium through which Kali, a given a priori, is reflected upon. This move to constitute Kali by a reflective discourse assumes that Kali, constituted by the reflective discourse is also determined by that discourse and thereby conflates constitution of Kali with Shakti, the agency of Kali. It presumes that beyond the symbolic exchange of the maternal figure of the goddess, Kali is the way it is constituted. To illustrate this one could look into a Chapter entitled, 'Margins at the Centre' by Sarah Caldwell in Rachel Fell McDermot's (ed.) *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*, where the author states about the goddess Bhagavati,

Dramatic possession performances, still an important part of South Indian goddess worship clearly developed from these ancient practices, which

stressed the passionate and violent nature of supernatural energy. This power, because it inherited in the physical landscape as well as in the bodies of women, was essential for the nourishment of life and society and yet always threatened to get out of control, destroying life (254).

This representation also transcodes Kali as “a paradoxical nature embracing all opposites” that is the ground realised as the truth of its ultimate signification. In her western incarnation on the internet as *Tantra: The Magazine* or the goddess of neo-tantra, she is the theoretical, cultural and political rhizome of the West’s new understanding of the east in terms of key elements of sexuality, healing, faith and so on. These are the received meanings of Kali in mainstream Western cultural appropriation of Kali, beyond which her agency is merely ‘subaltern’. The post-colonial critique of western appropriation of Kali gets caught in this plural representation of Kali: both traditional Kali and the Kali in the western setting are two exclusivities, assigned from a position of performativity. This is in contrast to an archaic and ancient position of Kali being the primal goddess of creation and destruction. Such a contrast between the performative and primal finds its reflective justification in constructing immanence of Kali in mainstream representations of Kali in the language of her subjects to whom she stands in a relationship of mother.⁸ This is a partitioning of Kali, the so-called ‘India’s darkest heart’ into a cult of castration complex, the ‘dark side of femininity and sexuality’. This is also a celebration of historicity distilled through devotion beyond the phallic function of her representation. Isn’t it the colonial and post-colonial historicity of an affinity and dislocation to a cult that is transcoded in western representation of the fierce and the sublime in Kali? One could look for an answer by affirming the notion of Kali as a correspondence between the icon and the devotee that erases traces of its own representation in a complex hermeneutic of the Western culture industry. Kali picks out the symbols in the figures of our lives that constitutes the reflection and experience of Kali in the religious life. This is a transformation of Kali into a figure for an interpretive perspective on life that changes the referents and sources of religious discourse into symbols of contemporary concerns, threats and wishes

of a community.⁹ How is such an interpretive community constituted with reference to the renewed understanding of Kali?

Marketing the Kali

A marketing of the Kali symbol requires prosthesis of Kali, reconstructed and redeemed from the exceptionalist oriental discourse and the objectivistic and phantasmic Western discourse of anxiety, dread and fear around the symbolic universe of Kali. This is a prosthetic Kali supplementing the lacks and absences imagined in her. The prosthesis merely draws elements of devotion in order to serenade a divine image (as available in Ram Proshad’s songs) along with a blend of her powers that include representation and interpretation of her feminine self. This is a ‘conceptual blending’ between diverse, symbolic and unconscious elements that are discretely available in the broad field of Western culture industry. Further it is an existential analytic of those of her traits that suits images in the market. Images of Kali embody and disclose her being in a peculiar way and the representation is affective and not theoretical. It is grounded in the western consciousness of an *other* goddess who is projected in the world.¹⁰ Here, Kali is one among other fetishes and the interpretation that it receives constitutes the contemporaneity of the figure of Kali. Historicity in the form of contemporary constitution of western religious positivism and pluralism invokes that “there is always the possibility of relating things differently” as Lyotard would have explained the contemporary paganism of Western cultural discourse. The pagan is both a principle of change, revision, variation, possibly revolution and a principle of tradition, social unity, belonging and cultural history.¹¹ Kali as a pagan element borrowed from the eastern culture transgresses the sexuality and the body and relays herself in the ruse of something that is not ‘classical’, totally undetermined by anything prior. This rise of neo-paganism in the West and imaging Kali as transgressive of the ‘classical’ eastern culture share historically constituted notions of de-territorialising each other. In consonance with this grafting of Kali’s body as the pagan goddess upon the shibboleths of western culture, she appears in the male cycle of symbols as ‘pure mother’ or as ‘psycho-physiological

response to a symbolically incestuous dilemma'. She is revered for the western scheme of overcoming the dilemmas of incest, horror of sexualised femininity and the fantasy of matricide. Kali reverses the fundamental matricide of western patriarchy by offering an apology to the male world in her tongue in cheek held-in-shame gesture. Yet, her 'darkness' images more than an abject body of the mother in shame, simultaneously ashamed of her symbolic patricide and embodying the shame of the matricide that the society commits on the body of the mother. She is discovered as different in her body as abject and yet energetic, as mere touching the body by the pilgrim gives a sensual and sexual 'bolt of electricity', as Rachel Fell Macdermott quotes from a poem written on Kali. But the problem is that Kali as different and a symbol of self-overcoming of the west is exchanged in the economy of gratification that cannot be accommodated within the genealogical and historical constitution of power of the West. Hence within the limits of reason, she could only be projected as virtual, hardwired and generative, both outside the genealogical constitution of history and economy of desire with which the western media and the market could identify itself.¹² This is not an identification of Kali with the market but a reverse identification of existing consumerist traits with Kali that turns itself into an object of pleasure for the abject body of Kali. As a ploy and device of identification, the West turns Kali's image into a virtual figure that seeks the West in her drive for sexuality and pleasure. But this is a contrast with the real, historical and cultural figure of Kali. As the newest fantasy, Kali's seeking of the West merges the sacred and the market, the dread and the pleasure, the devotion and the passion, a synaesthesia that finds its signification in the difference of perceiving Kali between the east and the west. Devotion and sexuality is mutable and interchangeable into each other, as the signifier Kali, Laxmi and other Indian gods and goddesses currently adorn the undergarments made for men and women in the US and Europe. The rapacious and raunchy consumerist signification of garments, ironically enough is a reproduction of female labour on the bodies of the wearers.¹³ In such representations of body embodying the body of the goddess blur the line between the consumer and the consumed as both are parts

of an imaging of extended reproduction of their images. In consonance with this strategy of foregrounding the female sexuality, a spectral Kali embodying all her transmuted qualities adorned by devotees is situated in their social and cultural contexts across the globe. Reproduction of Kali's sexuality in the west is therefore neutralised in the production of devotion in the east making the binary opposites of the market and the margin grafted onto each other in a cross-cultural transaction.

Notes

1. See Mark Driscoll's, 'Reverse Postcoloniality', *Social Text*, 22:1 (2004), 59-84. and Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Delhi, OUP, 1997. 8-9.
2. Cf Ibid, note 8, where Driscoll quotes Marx from an appendix to the first version of *Capital I* called "The Value Form," where he writes that the fetishising form of value allows each commodity to stand in social relation to the "world of commodities.... As a commodity it is a citizen of this world".
3. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah, California: Stanford UP, 1998, 40, where he comments, "We only speak one language... since it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for the other, from the other, kept by the other."
4. Historicisation involves an investment of meaning in practices of transforming the subjects of history into an artefact of representation. Althusser considered such move as transcending the limits of subject-object relationship. See, Louis Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, edited by Francois Matheron; translated by G M Goshgarian, Verso, London and New York: 2003, 256-57. Deterritorialisation means an act of turning the representation into something virtual, which is reverted back to the original. See, Alain Badiou, Deleuze: *The Clamour of Being*, translated by Lousie Burchill, Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, Minnesota, 1999, 82-91. Deterritorialisation of Kali as part of a symbolic practice of transforming her into a 'form' invested with a virtual existence beyond its cultural origins is reverted as an icon transcendent of culturally given meanings.
5. Jacques Derrida argued that the trace of the other is effaced between the analogy of God as 'wholly other' and God as 'every other'. The infinite

- alterity of God that can't be reduced to singularity of religious shibboleths. See Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, translated by David Willis, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995, 77-78, n 6.
6. Encounter is sought to be understood within recourse to experience itself, which is a passage to the other that is irreducible to the experience. See, Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978, 83. Also see "Kali Comes to America" by David Arthur Walters on AuthorsDen.htm and Hugh B. Urban's "India's Darkest Heart: Kali in the Colonial Imagination"(188) and Rachel Fell McDermott's "Kali's New Frontiers: A Hindu Goddess on the Internet" (273) in Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey Kirpal eds. *Encountering Kali in the Margins, at the Centre, in the West*, Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.
 7. In *Speculum*, Irigaray, the feminist philosopher talks about the constitutive absence of the female from the interior of the patriarchal language, which she calls matricide. According to her, maternal presence into language is always through the death of the mother. See, Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C Gill. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
 8. Immanence is constituted by language in its relationship with the other. See, Derrida, *Monolingualism*, op cit, 4, where Derrida says "(Monolingualism) constitutes me, it dictates the ipseity of all things to me..." Derrida also says, "There is no maternity that does not appear subject to substitution, within the logic or threat of substitution", 88.
 9. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds), *Religion*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998, 61-63, where Derrida argues that immanence of belief in an already pre-existing language constitutes the condition of Mitsein or being-in-the-midst-of-other beings.
 10. Aldo Gargani, 'Religious Experience as Event and Interpretation' in Derrida, *Religion*, op cit, 116-18.
 11. J F Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, Minnesota: U of Minnesota, 1985, pp 33-34, 40.
 12. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, 14-15.
 13. J F Lyotard, "One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles" (translated by Deborah J Clarke, Winifred Woodhull and John Mowitt) in Andrew Benjamin (ed), *The Lyotard Reader*, Oxford and Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1989, 111-22.
 14. For a discussion on Gothic art forms and the function of Gothic, see William Veeder, 'Ideology and Its Discontents or the Nurture of the Gothic or How Can a Text be Both Popular and Subversive' in Sukhbir Singh (ed), *Ideology and the American Novel*, New Delhi: B R Publishing Company, 1-19.
 15. For example, J N Mohanty, *Explorations in Philosophy*, New Delhi: OUP, 75-82.
 16. Moves of naturalisation is conceived as picking out references from the external world for any idea or mental image. See, Satya P Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
 17. Ajit Choudhury, Dipankar Das and Anjan Chakraborty, *Margin of Margins: Profile of an Unrepentant Postcolonial Collaborator*, Kolkata: Anustup, 2000.