

# Transcreating Another Kali

**Song for Kali: A Cycle of Images and Songs** by Nirode Mazumdar, inspired by Ram Proshad, English translation by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Books, Kolkata, 2000; pp 53, Rs 375.

SUKALPA BHATTACHARJEE

*Song for Kali* is a unique collection of 11 poems – songs written by Ram Proshad (1720-1781), an adored and popular singer-devotee of goddess Kali, whose devotional love songs constitute a special genre of Bengali spiritual love poetry. This collection has a preface and a French rendering of these poems by Nirode Mazumdar (1916-1982) and his wife, Marguerite. The visuals are inspired by the poetry of Ram Proshad and transliterated by Nirode Mazumdar himself. A bilingual Bengali-French edition had already emerged alongside Mazumdar's drawings. What makes this collection unique is an interventionist translational collaboration by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, well known for her translation of Derrida and Mahasweta Devi. Spivak was drawn towards the work of expatriate artist Nirode Mazumdar for the cultural affinity that they share towards this genre of Bengali poetry, which has a tremendous appeal for anyone who has grown up with it. Spivak offers an English version of these poems and perhaps none could have been more faithful than her to the Bengali source text and the French translation, given her knowledge, familiarity and understanding of the nuances of both the French and Bengali languages. This English translation of Nirode Mazumdar's bilingual preface and the 11 poems, alongside the sketch/drawings springs out very naturally from Spivak, not as a text of religious belief but as a 'habit of the mind' (to use Spivak's own words in the 'Translator's Note' in *Imaginary Maps*) arising from familial cultural practices during her childhood days which constitute her 'poetic faith' ('Translator's Note', *Song for Kali*).

From a perspective of cultural criticism, this tripartite collaboration of Ram Proshad, Mazumdar and Spivak across space and time involves certain critical interventionist tools. First is what Spivak calls Ram Proshad's 'transvaluation' of the words that are heavy with Sanskrit meanings, in his construction of the awesome image of Kali and his relationship with the goddess. Ram Proshad's use of the Bengali language as a critical tool ranges from childlike simplistic word pictures to Donne-like invectives and blasphemous images almost on the border of the Oedipal. Yet these expressions get transformed into flowers of complaint in the poet's songs ('Preface', *Song for Kali*), bringing devotional, sometimes rueful passionate tears to the eyes of all the common people of Bengal and even to a great devotee like Ramakrishna. One of Spivak's translated pieces, for example, has this to say of the 'love' that the devotee has of Kali:

I grieve that very grief.  
That there you are, my mother and waking  
I'm robed  
I think to take your name, yet while I  
forget.  
I know I've got the sense of it, I've  
understood your wife.  
That you have, got, took, and ate nothing,  
is the fault mine?  
If you'd given, gotten, taken, I'd've fed  
you your own.  
Good fame, bad name, good affects 'n bad,  
all essences are  
Yours.  
In such sweet mood, why break the mood,  
love-queen? (...) (38).

Next is Mazumdar's twofold translation – a simultaneous literal and semiotic translation of Ram Proshad's poetry into a cycle of songs and images. Mazumdar's sketchy drawings in black and white mostly follow the logic of literal bilingual translation. For example, the sketch adjacent to Spivak's translated Preface (30) is a visual translation of goddess Kali's manifest identity.

What Mazumdar does in his literal translation of the image of Kali in painting is to bring out the whole range of meanings that are attached to Kali, inexhaustible in any medium. So he

expresses this inexhaustibility of Kali in a form that speaks of a realisation of the multifacetedness of her Identity, to be grasped in colours that cast a shadow and gives us the sense of mystery that she embodies. Painting Kali in black not only retains the sense of the literal, but also reproduces the numb and euphoric sensibilia of her presence.

Finally comes Spivak's transgressional stance in translating, literally and inter-culturally, the stereotypes and concepts available in the cycle of songs and images which go into her self-reflexive appropriation of the cycle, and yet she distances herself from the closure of the cycle through an in-built instrument of 'othering', as she states. The inspiration and imagination that Spivak has drawn from Ram Proshad's songs of her childhood days in a Bengali household in Kolkata and her subsequent encounter with Mazumdar's drawings of these songs years later, is that of 'benign female violence, imagined by a male visionary' (Translator's Note, *Song for Kali*). A cross-gendering of possible representations of Kali's unusual and non-conformist image in Mazumdar moves beyond the simple logic of alterity of forms in Spivak's fresh translation of Mazumdar, unsettling what got structured in Mazumdar's conceptualisation of Kali. Thus, such translational exercise across space and time has added transnational value in the whole 'cycle of representations' and therefore, inspires an inter-cultural negotiation.

The Kali image that has emerged from Ram Proshad's songs is that of "hot gold tongue thrust out, trembling with the rays of outer space, three-eyed woman with loosened hair, world-lighting black, Mother naked (...)" (p 30). The bloodied, naked, raged Kali envisioned as mother, sometimes daughter and again just a 'girl' sometimes is a stereotype of the imagination of a devotee or worshipper who is inspired by Ram Proshad's songs. This stereotype of Kali undergoes a transformation through the 'faith' of a devotee and so the horrifying black, bloodied Kali becomes 'beautiful' and her rage results in her fondness for destruction of evil and assures grace towards her devotees. The translation of the Bengali original retains most of the elements of this transformation, which is actually one kind of cultural translation at the level of the imagination inspired by one's familiarity and rootedness to such a

cultural milieu of Bengal. This is what has been indicated in the following lines in the Preface, "(...) She-devil, ruthless, shameless naked mad women, even runting bitch; even these epithets, transformed beyond belief, blossom as flowers of complaint in the poet's songs"(p 30). In the dominant Bengali imagination, Kali is thus an entity that is transformed beyond belief, an absolute that is above the binary of good and evil and at the same time it is conceivable as the 'mother' who sustains life and the world. Thus Kali is more of a cultural icon than a religious symbol. The transformed Kali is an enigma, disturbing and yet encompassable through the complex figuring of her nullity. Nirode Mazumdar's sketch of this Kali as an 'other' is inscribed in the epicentre of a double 'bottomlessness', a downward triangular figure around a point numbering infinite, and encapsulation within layers of circles signifying a Nietzschean 'eternal return' and yet eluding all 'presence' in a perpetual mode of othering herself in the epicentre of creation and destruction (p 53). Spivak translates this simultaneous 'phenomenal' and 'noumenal' Kali as a play of the 'bitch' (the original of

Ramprasad's poem used the word 'Magi' in Bengali) giving it a transgressive shape:

...see the bitches game, her open secret moves  
she sets against your qualities the space beyond qualities and breaks lumps with lumps (p 52).

As the real Kali breaks lumps with lumps, in the same fashion three layers of translation in this collection breakthrough each other's closures. This last piece (cited above) in the work signifies the spirit of this transgressive, transformative and yet translational endeavour that progress through the inter-cultural journey.

The reason why a cultural critic might be drawn towards the construction of the Kali figure is for this transgressive element and the total reversal of the familiar world of dominant belief or an inversion of the mythical in such a construction, almost in the deconstructionist mode. Kali is a female who defies femininity, de-centres the orderly cosmos compelling the gods of the heavenly sphere to seek refuge at her feet. The turning of her eyes brings not the grace of the female glance but the cosmic chaos, as she must destroy in order to create and preserve.

Most significantly, Mohadeb, the God of gods also lies 'prone' at her feet as she marches off to war to kill Shumbho and Nishumbho, the evil giants. Kali disfigures the feminine in order to redefine and recreate the performative and activist essence of the female presence.

In spite of the intranslatibility of certain culturally loaded words, Spivak's translation succeeds in retaining the unique spirit of Ram Proshad's songs. In certain cases Spivak has made a literal translation of the original Bengali expression ('rakta jaba' as red hibiscus, 'abhijoger ful' as flowers of complaint, etc) for which it has been possible to have a feel of the impressionistic appeal in the childlike prayer of a devotee. Mazumdar's visual translation of how Ram Proshad's mind worked in imagining Kali and Spivak's faithful rendering of the words in respective cultural nuances have preserved a sense of itself, and yet the two have transcreated another Kali, through a process of othering. This project of Mazumdar and Spivak has reaffirmed the Coleridgean faith in the working of the secondary imagination and its capacity to dissolve and dissipate in 'order to recreate'. **EPW**