

# Literary and Cultural Readings of Goddess Spirituality



# Literary and Cultural Readings of Goddess Spirituality:

*The Red Shadow of the Mother*

By

Anway Mukhopadhyay

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For my family, in the largest sense of the word



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## INTRODUCTION

As I write this piece, on the wall before me hangs a clay image of Durga, very different from the conventional figuration of the goddess. Here, the Goddess dances— in the pose usually taken by Shiva’s Nataraja form – and all her ten hands show different *mudras*. Her head is not crowned with the *jatamukuta*, the chignon shaped like a crown; rather, her hair, unbound, flows like that of Kali. Under her feet lies the buffalo head of Mahishasura. This image is not exceptional in its innovativeness. During the Durgapuja, the most famous festival of Bengal, thousands of Durga images exhibit this creativity. The makers of these images do not slavishly follow the *shastric* (scriptural) injunctions regarding the formation of Devi’s images, but lend total freedom to their creative impulses. This is what signifies the most interesting aspect of a spiritual culture grounded in the Mother Goddess. As opposed to the frozen figurations of Devi insisted on by the orthodox Hindus and especially the fundamentalist groups, these reconfigurations of the Goddess indicate how the sons and daughters of the Mother can participate in the creativity whose ultimate source is Her (pro)creative force, the force that made the cosmos emerge. As we know, tantric epistemologies see the human body as a symbol of the Cosmos, the *Brahmanda*. Here, the relation between the body of the cosmos and that of the human individual is at once metaphoric and synecdochic. As Devi Amma says in *The Tantra Chronicles*, a collection of original mystic teachings received and compiled by Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani:

You will learn the difference between the Creator – Divine Mother – and the creators - my word for you and every other isness manifested by me. You will learn that all of you - animal, vegetable, mineral, air, water etcetera - are *creators*. This means you have the skill and the capacity to contribute to planet Earth as it evolves. You have a standing invitation to do so in any way you choose. (6)

As Devi Amma, the Divine Mother reminds us, we are all *creators*, and we partake of the creativity of our Mother, the *Creator*. That means we do have the right to reconfigure her in our own creative ways. The creators, even while knowing well that they are created by the Creator, become engaged in the act of creating new images of the Creator Herself. That is not transgression; that is the utilization of the freedom given to us by our Mother. The Shakta *puranas* like the *Devibhagavata Purana* and the

*Mahabhagavata Upapurana* project the Goddess as the Cosmic Creator, and the Hindu Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara, as Her Offspring. When we look at the literature of Shaktism, we come to realize how dynamic the medieval Hinduism of Eastern India was. While Shashibhushan Dasgupta sees the *Devibhagavata* as a Shakta imitation of the Vaishnavite *Bhagavata Purana* which extols the glories of Krishna (87), I would like to see such Shakta *puranas* as radical reworkings and constructive critiques of the patriarchal Hindu texts grounded in male-centric theologies. Creative and critical tempers merge here, and a new mythological spectrum comes into being. The best way to critically respond to the androcentric theologies is to create new myths, or interpret the existing myths, under the red shadow of the Mother. This kind of mythologization or re-mythologization is not synonymous with modern mythopoesis; rather, this kind of mythography is a means of participating in the creative project of the Mother, which she keeps perpetually open-ended.

As Mary Ann Beavis shows, scholars have often used terms like *Goddess Spirituality*, *Feminist Spirituality* and *Goddess Feminism* interchangeably. However, as she points out, some women (and even some feminists) would not like to “relate feminism. . . to their spirituality” (10). “Thus, Goddess Spirituality is more encompassing of a range of women’s experiences than formulas that incorporate feminism” (10). However, my concern is not confined to feminism only, nor am I exclusively thinking of the utility of Goddess-centric spirituality in *women’s* lives, though these issues, of course, inform a significant part of this book. Beavis, and many other proponents and scholars of Goddess Spirituality in the West have mainly seen it as a development in the feminist movement. However, in the case of India, the scenario is much more complex. We have had, in this country, millennia old traditions of Goddess worship, and the Mother Goddess has occupied a significant position in the daily rituals and systems of faith within elite as well as popular Hinduism. The Five Deities, whose worship is a must for all standardized puja rituals, include Durga Devi. Numerous male mystics (in several parts of India but especially in Bengal) have lived and died for the Mother Goddess; and their attitudes to women have reflected their devotion to a Cosmic Female Deity. On the other hand, female mystics, saints and spiritual leaders too have been seen as avatars of Devi, and hence venerated and endowed with social prestige and political power. So, in India the problem is not actually the lack of a female-centric theology, but rather a stunted social application of the egalitarian gender epistemes encapsulated in such theologies. Besides, in accordance with geo-cultural differences between

various zones of India, the Goddess assumes different kinds of social relevance. One of my students often draws my attention to the fact that the North Indian version of the Mother Goddess is much more domesticated than the Bengali version thereof. The discourse of the *necessary* docility of women, which is seen as a virtue in North India, gets directly reflected in the figurations of Devi in that particular geo-cultural zone. However, that does not mean that the Bengali worship of the fierce Kali automatically translates into “respect for women” or makes Bengali men essentially less sexist than their North Indian counterparts. Nevertheless, the difference remains. And it remains visible. However, the basic point that I want to underline here is that, in India (and also in the West), Goddess Spirituality does not need to operate only as a mode of feminism. It has a much vaster area to play in. For example, Lata Mani’s Goddess Spirituality, inflected by her adoration of the tantric teachings, has a much larger target audience than “feminists”. When she relates her gradual acceptance of Kali, descending upon her consciousness like a “dark night studded with stars” (7) and dissolving her cognitive framework, she is showing us what kind of plays the Goddess engages in within the domain of *human*, and not just feminine, consciousness. Mani does focus on Kali’s theo-political potentials for challenging the casteist and sexist frameworks of oppression, but more than that, she focuses on the dark goddess’s ability to create a mediating space between organized religion and organized anti-religiosity, where the *sacredsecularist* analyst, the contemplative cultural critic, gets a breathing space (Mani 7-9). Of course, in India today, the postcolonial feminists need to challenge and delegitimize the casteist, sexist, patriarchal appropriation of the Goddess by releasing the anti-patriarchal and deeply subversive potentials of the Shakti cults. But that is not all. Bringing men effectively under the red shadow of the Mother is as important as articulating a feminist theology based on the Goddess. The depatriarchalization of society is possible only if men are given a feministically inflected humanist education, and are allowed to actively participate in the movement for gender equality. It is precisely this which Betty Friedan had pointed out in her book *The Second Stage*. She wrote there, “The second stage may not even be a women’s movement. Men may be at the cutting edge of the second stage. . . The second stage will restructure institutions and transform the nature of power itself” (qtd. in Ranganathananda 10-11). Besides, it is also necessary to impart solid eco-ethical education to men (and women) regarding the interconnectivity of cosmic existence. That kind of education, when grounded in reverence and love for the matrix of the universe, the Mother, can be so spiritually energized that it would be able to make the men and women of the

contemporary world break the reactionary epistemologies - casteist, sexist, racist – with a passion for enlightened living. Precisely, Goddess spirituality has enormous significance for feminists and for women at large, but also for men and the animal and vegetable worlds that are the pathetic victims of our lack of eco-consciousness.

Charlene Spretnak, one of the pioneers of the Goddess Spirituality movement in the West, writes in the Introduction to *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, a book edited by her:

The title, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* refers to our attitude toward life on Earth (i.e. spirituality) and the perception, manifestation, and use of power (i.e. politics) that stem from that attitude. The world-view inherent in feminist spirituality is, like the female mind, holistic and integrative. We see connectedness where the patriarchal mentality insists on seeing only separations. (qtd. in Ranganathananda 15)

In the first chapter of *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* on “What the Goddess Means to Women”, Spretnak elaborates her ideas of Goddess Spirituality:

Many of the sacred myths of the Goddess that were told by our pre-patriarchal ancestors have survived and are now being gathered into books, although much of the Old Religion has been destroyed during the suppression of the patriarchal era. *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood: Our Goddess and Heroine Heritage* and *Lost Goddess of Early Greece* are examples of such collections. To sift through the surviving fragments of the ancient Goddess spirituality is a sobering experience. How close we came to losing that wisdom forever, to believing the patriarchal assertions that their politics of separation are the natural– the only– way to live.

Patriarchal governments and religions regard the current Goddess revival with deep-seated fear. Nothing threatens their power structure so resoundingly as the ancient consciousness that they believed had been crushed ...

Feminists do not claim to own the Goddess. She has meaning for all people as a symbol of the holistic nature of life on Earth, in which all forms of being are intrinsically linked and are one [...]. She also has special meaning for women as an expression of the power of the female body/mind. As such, it is not difficult to deduce why almost none of the history presented in the following selections appears in patriarchal textbooks. I am not suggesting a ‘conspiracy’ among scholars but, rather, a pervasive cultural attitude that all pre-patriarchal religions were less worthy than the Judeo-Christian system. For example, one never reads of

‘the religion of Artemis’ and ‘the cult of Jesus’; it is always the other way round. Similarly, the ancient Near Eastern words for ‘sanctified women’ or ‘holy women’ were translated by patriarchal scholars as ‘temple prostitutes’...

Contemporary Goddess spirituality, with its roots in pre-patriarchal culture embodies a multiplicity of meaning for women. She is ever, She is all, She is us. (qtd. in Ranganathananda 16-18)

In these beautiful passages, Spretnak deftly explains why Goddess Spirituality, though associated with the feminist movement, has greater potentials of changing our socio-cultural epistemologies and existential orientations. Her arguments validate the observations I have already made, regarding the broader horizon of possibilities for Goddess Spirituality. Spretnak’s observations come close to those of Mani, and it is here that the interconnectivity of Goddess spiritualists from different cultures becomes evident. It is absolutely necessary to identify these cross-culturally overlapping threads of Goddess Spirituality in the contemporary world.

Let me quote again a few lines of Spretnak from her book, *States of Grace*:

The central understanding in contemporary Goddess spirituality is that the divine – creativity in the universe, or ultimate mystery – is laced throughout the cosmic manifestation in and around us. . . The Goddess, as a metaphor for divine immanence and the transcendent sacred whole, expresses ongoing regeneration with the cycles of her Earthbody and contains the mystery of diversity within unity: the extraordinary range of differentiation in forms of life on Earth issued from her dynamic form and are kin. (qtd. in Reid-Bowen 81)

Devi Amma’s teaching in *The Tantra Chronicles* upholds the same ideas (12-15). The chapters of the present book try to touch, celebrate, and image forth the “sacred whole” Spretnak focuses on.

However, as I have already pointed out, female-centric theology has always remained a part of the Hindu traditions, and the Shakta tantras and *puranas* have intensified the cultural potentials of such a theology. In his book, *The Indian Vision of God as Mother*, Swami Ranganathananda, drawing on the views of Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Cheever Mackenzie Brown and other writers, highlights the unique tradition of seeing the Divine as maternal that one comes across in India (12-15, 19-22). He does not see the Hindu Mother Goddess merely as a manifestation of Shakti, Energy/Power. Rather, for him, the Magna Mater worshipped by the

Hindus is indicative of the fact that “behind this universe, there is a pulse of the Mother-heart; the pulse of the energy of compassion, love, and protective attitude—all that is associated with the idea of Mother” (6-7). Ranganathananda opines that a man can also partake of the “spiritual motherhood”, the immanent maternity in every being that the *Durgasaptashati* hails (42). He says, “Genetic motherhood alone is exclusively a feminine privilege, but spiritual motherhood is the privilege of all humanity” (42). He says that despite our noisy worship of the Divine Mother, “in our society in India, we lack the *mother-heart* in adequate measure” (42). And that is why he enunciates that men in India can and should become “spiritual mothers” (42-43). Here, interestingly, Ranganathananda underlines the responsibilities of the Mother’s male offspring towards the “sacred whole”, the interconnected web of universal life that She embodies. He is no less a Goddess spiritualist (in all the connotations of the term) than the feminist thinkers like Spretnak and Mani. And the reason why I keep referring to him is that, as a *male* academic with an inclination towards Goddess spirituality, I need to define my own critical position. Should a man’s involvement in Goddess spirituality always be seen as the male appropriation of a female theology? Or should it be welcomed, with the awareness of the “holistic” and “integrative” nature of Goddess spirituality that Spretnak focuses on?

This book attempts to invoke and install the Mother Goddess’s spirit in different disciplines of the Humanities. In that sense, this book has a performative dimension, that of an academic ritual of “sacredsecularizing” (a la Mani) the *space* of cultural analysis under the red shadow of the Mother. While we generally think that the Great Mother is an exclusive “property” of Hinduism, this book would argue that she has her apparitions in virtually all the religious formations of India. And one of the main objectives of this book is to explore the points of convergence as well as divergence between different Mother-centric religious discourses, prevalent in different communities, in India and also in the other parts of the world. The Indian traditions are rich with colourful figurations of the Mother Goddess that have always had a great psychic impact on the people of India, not just the Hindus, but also Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Aborigines and even in some cases Muslims. The present book seeks to explore the politico-cultural potentials of Goddess spirituality in India, from various textual and extra-textual perspectives. It strings together innovative readings of already existing literary texts and cultural phenomena from the critical perspective of Goddess spirituality.



One of the recurrent themes of this book is the appearance of the Mother as the *metaxu*, the middle ground, as well as the *matrix* of the cosmic existence. As the Creatrix of the world, She is not *above* it, but rather immanent in it, and also remains *beneath* the Creation, as a maternal substratum, a *matrix*. In one of the seals found from the remnants of the Indus Civilization, we find “a nude female figure lying upside down with outspread legs, a plant issuing from her womb” (Klostermaier 192). If we take this plant as a metaphor of the Samsara Vriksha, the Tree of Creation, we may project the nude female figure as the paradigm of the *matrixial* “Creator” who remains – always – *under* the Creation, as its maternal substrate. However, apart from Her matrixial function, the Mother also plays the role of the *metaxu*. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates relates how he was instructed in erotics by a wise woman, Diotima. Diotima teaches him the theory of Eros as *metaxu*, that is, a between, an intermediary (Iordanoglou and Persson 25-27). This in-betweenness, or intermediacy, seems to be a function of the Mother as well, for, she operates as an intermediary between good and evil, gods and the demons, the Created Universe and the Creative Consciousness. This mediating function of the Devi has been explored in this book, time and again.

Throughout this work, I have investigated the possibilities of inserting the figure of the Great Mother into the critical domain of cultural pluralism. A pluralism that is not based on violence and conflict (antagonism) but grounded in harmony would not find the figure of the Mother-as-*metaxu* a *persona non grata* in the arena of intercultural negotiations. It is *this* pluralism which I have celebrated. The book discusses various Mother Goddess figures from different cultural traditions of India, medieval and modern Europe and ancient Greece, including Goddess Kali, Sarasvati, the tantric wisdom goddesses, Prajnaparamita, various versions of Mother Mary, Goddess Lakshmi in Sri Vaishnavism, Aphrodite, Minerva and Isis (as presented by Christine de Pizan), and so on and so forth. The Mother is seen by the discourse articulated in this book mainly as a middle ground between flesh and spirit, knowledge and passion, harmony and conflict, justice and compassion. As the subtitle of this book indicates, the Mother’s shadow is red in colour, because it is palpable, as tangible as blood and flesh, and yet distanced from materialist determinism.

While writing this book, I have deliberately tried to avoid focusing on over-canonical texts and instead dwelt on those texts (especially those written in vernacular languages) which are underrepresented in the Indian and global academies. For instance, while speaking of the dacoits of Bengal and their links with the Devi, I have consciously eschewed a

discussion of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Debi Chaudhurani*, the great novel on the political dimension of Bengali banditry during the early phase of British colonialism in India. Instead, I have focused on obscure narratives which occupy the shadowy realm between half-historicised past events and "literary texts".

Though my focus is apparently Indocentric, I have included chapters on the global dimension of Goddess spirituality, and have discussed the Euhemerist interpretation of the goddesses from Greco-Roman myths by Christine de Pizan. In the same way, I have negotiated with exciting and striking trajectories of cross-cultural transactions: I have read Holderlin's poetry with the Indian tantric philosophy of language, focused on a Bengali writer's take on German Catholicism, inserted the absent figure of Goddess Prajnaparamita into the text of Kipling's *Kim*, attempted to simultaneously transculturalize Sarasvati and the Muse of the English language. I have built up a comparativist analytical framework and set up an interpretive bridge between the circle of Goddess Aphrodite and the circle of Goddess Kamakhya, placing Diotima, the female teacher of Socrates, between these two circles. In short, I have celebrated both the matrixial Oneness of the Polynymous Mother, and the unmanageable plurality set in motion by Her.

The first chapter engages in a prayerful meditation on the different figurations of Goddess-centric devotion in multiple religious cultures of India. Here I explore how Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies can be allied to Comparative Religious Studies, and then employed in the pragmatic purpose of maintaining religious harmony.

Chapter 2 places the circles of two female deities, Aphrodite and Goddess Kamakhya, side by side, and positions the figure of Diotima from Plato's *Symposium* between them. This comparativist and cross-cultural exploration of the themes of gender, Eros and wisdom involves mutually fertilizing readings of Diotima as a woman philosopher, the world of tantra, and the erotic mystique of the Aphroditean cult.

Chapter 3 discusses how the Magna Mater persists in the theological domain of Advaita Vedanta. Mainly a reading of Swami Vivekananda's complex approach to the Divine Mother, this chapter also tries to foreground the differences between the Indic and Western monistic philosophies, and discusses those monistic theologies of India which are based on the Mother. Here, too, I explore how the Mother becomes - in the case of the Advaitin monks like Shankaracharya and Vivekananda - a

*metaxu* between humble *bhakti* (devotion) and heroic *jnana* (Self-realization).

Chapter 4 illustrates the differences between the Hegelian *Aufhebung* and the Aurobindonian “Integration” with reference to the Divine Mother. It argues that in *Savitri*, multiple figures of the Mother Goddess are integrated and thus, the Mother Aurobindo celebrates here is not just the Hindu Mahadevi, but a comprehensive Mother figure embodying various Hindu and even non-Hindu modes of Goddess spirituality.

Chapter 5 discusses the relation between Goddess Sarasvati and the English language, and critically investigates certain public assumptions in India regarding the English language and its relation to the indigenous cultural, linguistic and especially religious traditions. Arguing for a radical transculturalization of the Muse of the English language, this chapter interrogates the subterraneously Eurocentric approach to the language which seeks to underpin the belief that Goddess Sarasvati can never be a divine, Muse-like guide for the liberal but practising Hindus writing in English, as she belongs only to the “Sanskritic” tradition. Simultaneously, I also chart out the possible modes of transculturalization of Sarasvati herself.

Chapter 6 reads two poetic figures of the beloved woman, Holderlin’s Diotima and Jibanananda Das’s Banalata, from the perspective of the Tantric philosophy of language, where several stages of Vak/Speech are figured as goddesses, with the Para Vak, Transcendent Speech, portrayed as the Divine Mother in whom the word and the world become one.

Chapter 7 invokes the Goddess of Perfect Wisdom, that is, Prajnaparamita, in the midst of a discussion of Kipling’s *Kim*. I relate the “feminine” theme of the novel to the absent figure of Prajnaparamita whom I involve in a play of metonymic co-configuration with Mother Earth.

Chapter 8 discusses two female figures from Rajasthan during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. One is Mira Bai, and the other is Karni Mata. While Mira is seen as the archetypal lover-devotee of Krishna, Karni Mata is seen by her devotees as the divine avatar of Goddess Durga. Reading these figures together, I engage in an exciting comparativism which is, nevertheless, inflected by Mani’s principle of “contemplative cultural critique” (1-4).

Chapter 9 discusses two short stories by the Bengali author, Saiyad Mujtaba Ali. One of these stories focuses on the reverent approach of a

Bengali Muslim man, living in Germany, to the Virgin Mary. I argue that, in this scenario of cultural translation, the man is helped by the absent Bengali Mother Goddess, who becomes, again, a *metaxu* in this difficult intercultural understanding, and deepens its affective dimension. In this story and the other one which is about a German nurse's affection for her illegitimate child, motherhood is *sacredsecularized*, and it is this sacredsecular ethos which becomes the unique trait of the Marian devotion presented by Ali.

Chapter 10 engages in a very intricate intercultural negotiation. Here I discuss the Euhemerist interpretation of the Greco-Roman goddesses like Minerva and Ceres, articulated in Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies*, and explore the Christian goddesses figured in this text who are theologically elevated, as opposed to the pagan goddesses, held to be mere human beings deified by their communities. And then, I switch over to Spivak's "Moving Devi" and show how the "pagan" goddesses ought to be seen from a critical perspective different from the Euhemerist one. The concept of *avatarana* as explained by Spivak, which argues that the Divine *comes down* into the natural and the mundane, becomes, in my opinion, a preferable analytical mode for dealing with the non-Christian female divinities.

Chapter 11 examines the peculiar position of the Devi in the hi/stories of the Bengali dacoits who were a big threat to the British rulers in the early phase of colonialism in India. I discuss several cultural paradigms of the figuration of the Goddess as integrally associated with the robbers - the colonial, the *bhadralokian*, and the postcolonial. Placing canonical and non-canonical texts side by side, I engage in a subversive and academically transgressive postcolonial critique of the colonial representations of the Devi as essentially associated with criminality and "darkness".

Chapter 12 deals with the complex ways in which the thinkers like Madhu Khanna, Lata Mani and William Schindler seek to build up the paradigm of an alternative modernity. It is what I call the tantric modernity. However, this tantric modernity also necessitates a modernization of tantra, an attempt at taking out the tantric epistemologies from the closed, secret circles of transgressive theory and praxis into the larger societal domain. And ultimately it is the matrixial pervasiveness of the Mother which holds out the possibilities of the socio-epistemic expansion of tantric philosophy with a sacredsecular ethos.

And finally, there is an Epilogue, where I complete my sacredsecular contemplation on the Mother, and come back to my dancing Durga, as a critic-creator (a la Devi Amma).

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# CHAPTER ONE

## THE POLYNYMOUS MOTHER AND CULTURAL PLURALITY: PRAYERFUL MEDITATION ON THE “MOTHER” IN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS LITERARY CULTURES IN INDIA

As I have already stated, this book engages in ritually invoking and installing the spirit of the Mother Goddess in different disciplinary fields of the Humanities. This chapter invokes Her in the domain of Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies. Religious absolutism is almost always androcentrically inflected, and informed by patriarchal theologies. That, however, does not mean that a Mother-centric theology would automatically translate into feminist sensibilities. Still, we can envisage a Mother-Goddess-centric episteme of intercultural negotiation, and though it cannot be claimed to be a panacea in these troubled times of fundamentalism and religious intolerance, such an epistemology can lend a new socio-epistemic dimension to comparativism. Comparativism, in the context of Indian culture, must seek to have an extra-academic significance, that is to say, a broader social relevance and a substantively pluralist orientation. Such kind of comparativism can serve to underpin the pluralism-in-practice that marks India's religious cultures. Though we often hear pompous talks about religious harmony we seldom see the academic disciplines take a proper initiative to intellectually stimulate such harmonization. This chapter seeks to propose a mode of cultural and literary comparativism that underlines and celebrates the multiple points of convergence between different religious epistemologies in India, through the exploration of the topos of devotion to the “Mother” in certain Buddhist, Hindu and Christian literary and cultural texts. While it is thrilling to discover the amazing points of commonality between the polychromatic sentiments which inform the diverse hymns to the “Mother” - like Abhirami Bhattar's *Abhirami Anthathi*, Ramprasad Sen's *Shakta padas*, Shariputra's hymn to Prajnaparamita and other similar

Buddhist hymns, and the popular Hindi hymns to Mary - it is more important to observe how these convergent religious sentiments focussed on the divine maternal figure can fill up the fissures between different religious “structures of feeling” (Williams 128-135) that the fundamentalists seek to hold up. The “Mother” has many names: Prajnaparamita, Virgin Mary and Kali do not share same theological origins, nor do they exemplify exactly similar kinds of divine feminine agency. But when they are transformed into the objects of a Mother-centric religious sentiment their socio-cultural functions become similar. It is this similarity which I plan to underline in this chapter. Today the global academy is obsessed with the politics of cultural differences. However, the postcolonial Indians, who are the children of the Partition, know only too well how dangerous this game of “difference” and “differentiation” may become, when pushed to the extreme. The equivalences between different religious cultures need to be passionately foregrounded so that cultural difference does not get translated into a false episteme of *essential* ontological difference between individuals and communities. It is quite possible that my religious sensibility is different – to a great extent – from yours, but that does not mean that there is nothing similar – no point of convergence – between our approaches to the sacred. Every year, in the very sophisticated conferences on Comparative Literature that I attend, I keep hearing about the necessity for appreciating “difference”. Similarity or commonality seems to be a term abhorred by the comparatists *de nos jours*. However, if there were only differences and no commonalities, communication between human beings would become impossible. Hence, I strongly believe that the theoretical obsession with difference needs to be balanced with a *practical* focus on the equality (in status) of and commonalities between diverse cultures. Hannah Arendt argues that each individual is “unique”; but for her, this uniqueness has two components – equality as well as alterity (otherness or difference). It is this element of basic equality between humans which makes communication possible (Arendt 175-176). We need to extend this thesis to the context of cultures, and of intercultural negotiation, and underline the fact that, though cultures are different from each other, there are some points of equality or commonality between them which cannot be denied by any theoretical sleight of hand. When I invoke the Mother Goddess as a *metaxu*, a middle ground, I ponder over the potentials of Goddess spirituality for building a bridge between difference and similarity (and equality), which may offer us some space for walking together, rather than drowning together in the stagnant pool of academic nihilism.



From the vast repertoire of Indian literatures centring round the figure of the Divine Mother, I will pick up only a few fragments to drive my point home. The method of this kind of arrangement may seem a bit haphazard and eclectic, but I believe that it will metonymize the cultural plurality I seek to celebrate through this paper. Let me begin with the great hymn to Prajnaparamita uttered by Shariputra in the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita*. In this hymn, the figure of Prajnaparamita assumes a maternal role. The mother of the Bodhisattvas, she protects and guides her children. She takes the aspirant to the all-illuminating aura of the perfect wisdom (*Perfection of Wisdom* 129). It is clear that the hymn is based on a particular philosophic-mystical doctrine, namely the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. But the interesting point is that Prajnaparamita, in this hymn, is no more an abstract philosophical concept; she is a loving mother who protects and nourishes her children. To put this on a comparative spectrum with the scenario of Advaita Vedanta, we may ponder on the difference in emotional-intellectual structures between – on the one hand - the *prakarana granthas* of Shankaracharya like *Viveka-chudamani*, where the abstract spiritual principle of the supreme consciousness is foregrounded - and, on the other hand, his impassioned hymns to the Divine Mother (the most celebrated of them being the *Saundaryalahari*). While the former seem too distant from the realm of the common human emotions, the latter bring philosophy to the earthly realm, and foreground the Mother figure as a mediatrix between the limitations of our human condition and the unlimited expanse of Sat-Chit-Ananda. Whenever the Mother comes into the scenario, the dualities of philosophical categorization begin to be shaken. As Miranda Shaw observes, the popular and tantric modes of Buddhism often celebrate the Mother of the Buddhas more than the Buddha himself, and thus, instead of dwelling on the horror of the womb, erase the chasm between the physical, earthly womb and the cosmic womb (Shaw 48-53).

When we think of the possibilities of a cultural bridge-building through the performative celebration and pedagogical exploration of the figure of the Mother Divine in different social contexts of India, we need to think of two possible modes of comparativism: a) the comparative study of the Mother-centric religious sentiments in different geographical locations in India, and b) a comparativist negotiation between the Mother-centric religious sentiments in different religions in India. At first I would dwell on the first method proposed above, and then move on to explore the second possibility. Though many studies have been conducted so far to explore the Mother-centric theologies and religious practices on a pan-Indian level, seldom have the scholars felt the necessity to comparativistically negotiate

with the various points of convergence and divergence between different Mother-centric modes of religiosity in various geo-cultural zones in India. Let me start the exploration of this issue with an apparently flimsy cultural text – a somewhat informal article published by Gitanjali Banerjee on her blog, *Travel by Karma*. Here, she addresses the “Navratri celebrating North Indian” in a quasi-sarcastic tone and complains that the “North Indian” Navratri celebrants often look down upon the Bengalis for their consumption of non-vegetarian food during Navratri. She says:

Once a lady tested my patience by surmising, “*What kind of puja you Bengalis do. You eat non-veg and say that it is your puja*”. . . I am a Bengali. Guys, please accept it once and for all. Don’t give me dirty looks and act surprised when I say I eat non veg during Navratri. Your Navratri is my Durga Puja and for Bengali people it is a celebration time. We eat only non-veg during Durga Puja and not only that we even sell non-veg food in or near our pandals.

I am not committing any sin or blasphemy. Our Maa Durga, the Bengali version of Durga has happily given us permission not to be on fast. She loves to see us happy.

This is a serious problem as far as our inter-regional cultural relations and negotiations are concerned. We attach too much importance to flimsy things like diet and so on, and refuse to look into the deeper similarities and dissimilarities between the different regional religious cultures concerned. For instance, when the animal sacrifice in Durga puja is condemned by some “North Indian” purist as a heterodox affair, what s/he denigrates is not just the “Other’s” culture but rather the plurality of the Hindu *shastras* themselves. The depluralization of Hinduism that is encouraged by such reductionist and fundamentalist sentiments is dangerous: if the *Kalika Purana*, allowing the *vali* (638-639), is my *shastra*, and not yours, that does not mean that my religious culture is heterodox or objectionable. I am operating within a different kind of *shastric* framework, and what is apocryphal for one geo-cultural frame of Hinduism is canonical for another. However, the more important point is that a proper inter-cultural negotiation between two people coming from different cultures of Mother worship should not resemble the dialogue between Gitanjali and the North Indian lady she mentions. Because, in the present context, more important than the dietary dissimilarity is the similarity between the emotional-conceptual structures that shape the North Indian and Bengali modes of Mother worship. And, it is also necessary to remember that the points of dissimilarity between them are more serious than eating veg or non-veg food: while the North Indian form of the Goddess is just a female deity who is equal to or even sometimes

subservient to the Hindu Trinity, for the Bengalis she occupies the apex of the cosmic hierarchy – she is the supreme goddess who is more important than the Trinity. Again, the *vrat*-like frame of Navratri opens up a space for women’s active participation in the Mother worship in North India, while the Durga puja in Bengal follows a ritualistic structure which is more rigidly Brahminical and operates within a patriarchal framework. However, despite these differences, is it really true that Gitanjali’s Goddess is essentially different from that of the North Indian lady? Gitanjali herself acknowledges that it’s the “same” Goddess who is worshipped in the two different cultural locations. But this similarity or commonality is never recognized as a unique example of the “equality” (à la Hannah Arendt) of the “structures of feeling” shaping the Navratri celebrant’s psyche and that of the Durga puja celebrant. The limitations of our regionalistically conditioned cultural imagination can be radically renegotiated when we find similarities between the devotional songs or poems centred on the Mother in Bengal and North India, or any other part of India for that matter. The nineteenth century Hindi language poet Balmukunda Gupta’s poems on the theme of Mother worship have various points in common with the Bengali poetry composed by his Bengali contemporaries. Just as the Bengalis can never differentiate the beauty of the season of autumn from the imagery of Durga puja, Gupta too celebrates the beauty of autumnal nature as an integral part of the festive mood surrounding the Mother Goddess’s worship. As Shashibhushan Dasgupta notes, like his Bengali contemporaries, Gupta too mixes his religious sentiment with nationalist fervour. There is, again, a striking similarity between a song by the Bengali poet Ramdulal Das Datta and a poem by Gupta, both centring round the motif of turning the heart of the Mother-worshipper into a crematorium so that the fierce goddess, who loves the ambience of crematoriums, can establish her seat in the devotee’s heart (Dasgupta 399-400). This same motif of turning the heart into a crematorium occurs in Vivekananda’s poem, “Nachuk tahate Shyama”, beautifully translated by Nirala into Hindi (Dasgupta 406). Thus, the Mother has always lent herself to cultural translations, and it is unjust to overlook these deep commonalities between the cultures (literary or otherwise) of Mother worship prevalent in Bengal and Hindi-speaking North India. Hence, it is necessary to mention that the new kind of comparativism I propose here would be able to erase the problems faced by Gitanjali.

In the same way, Ramprasad Sen’s (the famous eighteenth century Bengali Shakta poet and mystic) songs to Kali (McLean 53,56,91) and Abhirami Bhattar’s (an eighteenth century Tamil saint who was an ardent devotee of

Goddess Abhirami, a form of Goddess Parvati) *Abhirami Anthadi* (stanzas 46,47, 86), though belonging to different poetic genres and geo-cultural milieus, foreground similar sentiments – both are concerned with death and look forward to the Mother's intervention at the moment of death. The Mother becomes the ultimate spiritual illuminator here, much like Shariputra's Prajnaparamita. Goddess Abhirami, Kali or Prajnaparamita performs the similar kind of spiritually mediating role in the development and unfolding of the psycho-spiritual drama of the Mother's devotee. The Mother becomes the savior of the frail human flesh, and offers an enlightenment with compassion and love, instead of insisting on the rigorous and lifeless ratiocinative project encouraged by Advaita Vedanta. The Mother worship of Northern India is neither generically nor emotionally or conceptually different from that in South India, and when I read Amarananda Bhairavan's *Kali's Odiyya*, set in a South Indian village and centring round the mysticism of Kali-centric spirituality, as a Bengali reader, I don't feel alienated from the sentiment exhibited by the writer, and the mysterious ramifications of the Kali-cult that he draws out seem to be culturally accessible to me, due to my acquaintance with the tantric/magical context of the aboriginal Kali of Bengal.

After exploring the possibilities of an interregional cultural comparativism centred on the figure of the Mother, let me see how we can envisage a similar kind of comparativist project in an interreligious context. Let me begin with one of my favourite poets in Bengali literature, Kazi Nazrul Islam, a poet who also happens to be the national poet of Bangladesh. Though a Muslim, Nazrul composed a lot of devotional songs addressed to the Mother Goddesses Kali and Durga and presented a very complex religious and political sentiment through them (McDaniel 183-187). His songs often echo the spiritual sentiments of self-sacrifice evident in the Shakta poems of Vivekananda. Besides, he seeks to free the Mother from the prison of official, ritualistic worship (thereby following the spiritual-theological steps of Ramprasad) and to spiritualize Mother worship so deeply that it gets transformed into a project of our ontological transfiguration and the society's radical, egalitarian, and even socialist restructuring. These songs are extremely popular in both West Bengal and Bangladesh, and they are sung on the occasion of the annual Kali puja in Bengal. Many artistes, coming from both Hindu and Muslim communities, sing these songs, and we are also told exciting stories about Nazrul's deep interest in Shaktism and tantra.

Many Western thinkers, from Sister Nivedita and John Woodroffe to David Frawley, whether they have converted to Hinduism or not, have

found the Mother-centric theology of Shaktism acceptable and appreciable. Those modes of Christianity which focus on Marian devotion are similar to certain modes of Mother worship in India in terms of their underlying “structures of feeling”. Like Mary in Catholicism, Sri or Lakshmi becomes an intermediary figure between Vishnu and the sinful humans in Sri Vaishnavism. What becomes most important in this spiritual-philosophical doctrine is Sri’s grace directed towards the devotees who are afraid of the consequences of their sins. As David Kinsley points out, she “willingly intervenes with her often-stern husband on the devotee’s behalf” (31). Mary often plays the same role in Christian theology (Zimdars-Swartz 247). And in the Hindi hymns to Mary like “O Maa Mariam Tera Naam” we find Mary presented as a divine figure who would save her devotees from their sins and shower divine grace on them, much like the compassionate Lakshmi of the Sri Vaisnavas, and like Prajnaparamita, the Mother of Buddhas, extolled by Shariputra.

While Julia Kristeva thinks that the sublimity of the “Stabat Mater” can dissolve the necessity of all pagan mother goddesses (262-263), we, in India, witness the harmonious co-existence of the Virgin Mary and the so called pagan goddesses. The Buddhists associate *karuna* with *prajna* (Nagao 2), and it is this association which informs the Hindu goddess figures and the figure of Mary as well. It is this combined power of wisdom and compassion that is necessary – nay, indispensable – for our troubled and turbulent times.

Can we envisage a planetary expansion of the wisdom and compassion embodied in the polynymous Mother in these times of global restlessness and intolerance? And, can this imaginative broadening of our cultural epistemes serve to install at the heart of our academic praxis what Lata Mani calls the “SacredSecular”, a principle that sets in motion a “contemplative cultural critique”(1-4)?

The following chapters will engage, precisely, in this enterprise.

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