

Paradox of Goddess Kali as a Blood Devouring Mother: A Study of the Literary Representation of Kali with Reference to Bankim Chandra Chatterji’s *Kapalakundala*

Deeptangshu Das

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam, India.

ABSTRACT

The literary representation of Goddess Kali in Bankim Chandra Chatterji’s *Kapalakundala* (1866) presents a paradoxical image of a blood thirsty yet maternal goddess, which is foregrounded along with the trope of human sacrifice. While this theme of sacrifice highlights the larger gender politics of the novel, it also allows us to study the tension between the contending constituencies of Kali worshippers. The plot of Chatterji’s novel revolves around the tragic fate of Kapalakundala at the hands of her adoptive “kapalika” father who sets out to punish his daughter’s betrayal for she obstructs the ritual of human sacrifice. She rescues the captured Nabakumar and eventually escapes with him from the island after a brief marriage ritual. The kapalika’s revenge is finally realized when due to a chain of events Nabakumar suspects his wife of committing adultery and proceeds to kill her under his father-in-law’s instructions. Even though Nabakumar’s doubts are dispelled at the last moment when Kapalakundala states the fact of her chance meeting with his first wife, the tragedy becomes inevitable as she decides to commit suicide as a gesture of sacrificing herself to the goddess.

KEYWORDS

Representation, mother figure, literary paradox, narrative

This paper attempts to study the literary representation of Goddess Kali with special reference to Bankim Chandra Chatterji’s *Kapalakundala* (1866) where the paradoxical image of a blood thirsty yet maternal goddess is foregrounded along with the trope of human sacrifice. While this theme of

sacrifice highlights the larger gender politics of the novel, it also allows us to study the tension between the contending constituencies of Kali worshippers. The plot of Chatterji's novel revolves around the tragic fate of Kapalakundala at the hands of her adoptive "kapalika" father who sets out to avenge his daughter's betrayal for she obstructs the ritual of human sacrifice. She rescues the captured Nabakumar and eventually escapes with him from the island after a brief marriage ritual. The kapalika's revenge is finally realized when due to a chain of events Nabakumar suspects his wife of committing adultery and proceeds to kill her under his father-in-law's instructions. Even though Nabakumar's doubts are dispelled at the last moment when Kapalakundala states the fact of her chance meeting with his first wife, the tragedy becomes inevitable as she decides to commit suicide as a gesture of sacrificing herself to the goddess.

Within the plot structure it is clearly seen that the figure of Kali remains central to the events that occur in Kapalakundala's life starting from her elopement from the island till her tragic suicide. The name "Kapakundala" which refers to earrings shaped like the human skull is evocative of an unconventional femininity that one associates with the figure of Kali who is often depicted as a wearer of human skulls. The narrative presents a highly ambiguous relationship between Kapalakundala and her patron goddess Kali. Here one is reminded of the instance she pays a visit to the Kali temple before departing from the island. When she offers a holy leaf to the goddess it instantly falls down which she reads an omen of a potential calamity. And towards the end of the novel she re-invokes Kali when she finally decides to end her life as way of freeing herself from the conjugal bond—

There had grown within her a strong attachment to Kali, who she believed was the ruler of the world, the arbiter of human destiny and the bestower of deliverance. Her sensitive heart could not bear the thought that human blood should wet the earth sacred to Kali, but in all matters her faith was flawless. And now Bhairavi....had commanded her in a dream that she surrender her life. (93)

From the above quote, it is seen that Kapalakundala is torn between two forms of the Shakti Goddess. While Kali on the first occasion warns her of an impending danger after the marriage, later on the same Kali in the form of Bhairavi becomes her inspiration for self-annihilation. There is an irony at work here where Kali fails in her role as the protector and is rather transformed into a figure of the devourer. The narrator tells us a very crucial fact— "Unlike the kapalika, her life was not completely in the service of the goddess" but her emotional attachment to Kali has been shaped by the kapalika's own devotion (93). Even as she disapproves of the kapalika's ritualized

practice of blood sacrifice yet she does not dismiss the idea of the sacrifice itself. “She too was ready to sacrifice herself to please the Goddess” (93). Kapalakundala’s sacrifice becomes both literal and symbolic at the same time. She sacrifices her conjugal relationship with Nabakumar so that Padmavati can win her husband back. And she is also ready to sacrifice her life to the goddess which in turn makes her acquire the status of a goddess herself as Nabakumar dramatically pleads to her at the final moment— “Save me, Mrinmayi, Kapalakundalae. Here I am at your feet, tell me once that you haven’t been unfaithful” (97). Even though she proves herself to be innocent she refuses to come back into the social institution of marriage itself and she sees in Kali as the ultimate escape from the world even though it might lead to her own self-destruction.

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya argues that through the character of Kapalakundala, Bankim portrays the tension between the two models of femininity- the unconventional “yogini” (ascetic) on the one hand and the conventional “grihini” (wife) on the other (Bhattacharya 162). And I endorse Bhattacharya’s comment that Kapalakundala’s transition from a “yogini” to a “grihini” is never complete in the real sense and rather it proves to be destructive for her (Bhattacharya 163). Bhattacharya examines the novel primarily from Bankim’s own ideological standpoint on the question of women’s emancipation complemented by his philosophical views on the “Nature/Society” dichotomy (Bhattacharya 166). While this becomes a useful approach in our reading of the novel yet it is also crucial to examine this gender politics in relation to the representation of the Goddess. I have already cited one of the instances where in the temple Kapalakundala gets a premonition from Kali through a falling leaf that her marriage might invite some danger in the future. When she reports this to the *adhikari*, he replies— “there’s nothing we can do now. Henceforth, your husband is your only dharma, and you must follow him to the pyre” (29). A sense of fatalism is conveyed in this entire episode where it seems that Kapalakundala’s downfall becomes inevitable. Even as Kali warns her, her fate is ultimately sealed because her marriage with Nabakumar cannot be nullified once it has taken place according to the Brahmanical rituals. In other words once Kapalakundala is incorporated into the patriarchal order there is no escape from it. However, at the end she decides to renounce her worldly bonds by choosing death over a life of captivity.

Kapalakundala has two different vision of the Goddess during the final moments of her life, one where she sees Kali as terrifying yet maternal guiding her path to freedom and death- “I will show you the way my child” (94) and the other where the same goddess is instantly transformed into a warrior “laughing lustily” as the *kapalika* and Nabakumar escort her to the cremation ground for

the sacrificial ritual- “with the large trident that Bhairavi held in her hand, she pointed where the kapalika had gone” (95). While both these images symbolize death, the warrior goddess comes across as a more malevolent force that is activated by the kapalika’s ritual of human sacrifice. It is noteworthy as to how the names “Kali” and “Bhairavi” are used in the novel where they seem to represent two different persona of the same goddess. While for *Kapalakundala* the two names are interchangeable, the kapalika addresses the goddess only as “bhairavi”. According to David Kinsley, Kali and Bhairavi are two different goddesses that belong to the group of the ten Hindu “wisdom-goddesses” known as the “mahavidyas” (Kinsley 9). While Kali is described as the “black goddess” Bhairavi is understood as the “fierce one” whose primary role in the cosmic process is destruction (Kinsley 11). Although Bankim’s novel doesn’t pronounce this distinction clearly, it is nevertheless seen that the narrative debunks the image of the benevolent goddess where “Bhairavi” herself seems to sanction the ritual of human sacrifice as practiced by the kapalika. I would argue that the novel not only enacts a tension not just between two representations of the Goddess but also between two modes of worship, namely the Tantric mode of worship embodied in the kapalika as opposed to the Brahmanical mode of worship as exemplified by the *adhikari*. To elaborate on this point one has to engage in a sociological and historical study of Shakti worship in Bengal where it becomes possible not just to imagine the goddess in multiple ways but one can also think of newer patterns of worship and constituencies of believers. Bankim’s *Kapalakundala* is set in the context of late sixteenth century Bengal which is also the period when Tantric worship of Kali was gaining ground. Kinsley observes that by the late medieval period spanning from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century Kali got associated especially with the “Tantrism of the left-handed esoteric tradition”, known as the “vamacara” tantra mostly popularized in Bengal and Assam (Kinsley 197).

According to the philosophy of the vamacara tantra, the worshipper or the “sadhaka” undertakes a heroic task of confronting the power of Kali in order to overcome his own fears and transform into a vehicle of salvation (Kinsley 200). And the worshipper has to perform the prescribed ritual of “pancha-makara” or the ritual of the five forbidden things that includes partaking of “wine, meat, fish, parched grain and sexual intercourse” (Kinsley 199). In other words, Tantric worship presents a sharp contrast to the mainstream Brahmanical culture that subscribes to notions of purity and the forbidden. But the so called transgressive element of the Tantric worship is defined only within the context of the Brahmanical value system that values certain acts and substances as impure and polluting and thereby Tantrism is dialectically related to Brahmanic orthodoxy (Kripal 213). In *Kapalakundala* one gets to see this opposition between the kapalika who is a prototype of

the outcaste tantric figure as opposed to the *adhikari* who is a Brahmin and worships Kali within the socially sanctioned space of the temple. One is reminded of the remark made by the *adhikari* when *Kapalakundala* expresses her guilt for having betrayed the *kapalika*. He warns her that the *kapalika* has some other evil intention lurking in his mind and would eventually exploit her sexually for the tantric rituals. And so, it would be in her best interest to depart from the island as *Nabakumar's* wife. When *Nabakumar* encounters the *kapalika* for the first time on the island he is repulsed by the highly grotesque figure:

Nabakumar found the man with matted hair seated on a headless rotting corpse. His fear grew when he noticed a skull by the man's side, brimming with a red liquid. The nearby ground was littered with bones, and there were pieces of bone stuck in the man's bead necklace. (12)

It is clear from the description that the *kapalika* almost becomes a mirror reflection of his patron goddess *Bhairavi* who is identified with a similar monstrosity. The anti-social tantric who remains on the fringes of society identifies with a goddess who is often perceived as being transgressive. However, the novel depicts the *kapalika* as the archetypal cold-blooded villain who does not hesitate in seeking revenge on his adopted daughter. Though one cannot speculate on *Bankim's* own response to Tantrism but there is a clear sense in which the novel presents a negative view of Tantric worship with all its dark and sinister aspects. As opposed to the *kapalika*, the *adhikari* represents the normative Brahmanical system of worship. The *adhikari* introduces her to the domestic ideology of marriage even though she herself is not entirely convinced about her suitability for that social institution. "Marriage is a woman's only dharma; and, that is why a man's wife is also called his *sahadharmini*. Even the Mother of the universe is married to Shiva" (24). Unlike the *kapalika's* conception of a blood thirsty "Bhairavi", the *adhikari* imagines Kali as a domesticated Goddess who in spite of her ferocity happens to be a wife of Shiva. Within the discourse of Hindu patriarchy Kali as the wife is presented as the ideal role model for a young woman such as *Kapalakundala* who has to be initiated into the role of a "grihini" or a dutiful wife.

Kapalakundala finds herself under the influence of the two surrogate father figures- the anti-social *kapalika* on the one hand who brings her up as a "yogini" as opposed to the *adhikari* who incorporates her into the normative Hindu social system. She is caught between the two of these opposing worldviews where she perceives the fundamental flaws in both the systems. Just as she sees the tantric practices of the *kapalika* as being ruthless and amoral, she finds the shackles of social matrimony as being equally oppressive where a woman is denied freedom of her own.

Neither as a “yogini” nor as a “grihini”, neither as a tantrik’s daughter nor as a wife of a Brahmin man Kapalakundala can exercise freedom in the real sense nor as a result death becomes the only viable alternative available to her. Tanika Sarkar observes how Bankim engages in a “radical imagining” by articulating a unique kind of woman whose desire to remain undomesticated, self-sufficient and independent can be seen as an “aesthetic exercise” detached from “ulterior religious or political purpose” (Sarkar 146). From the preceding discussion, we have established that *Kapalakundala* captures the tension between the two belief systems, Tantric and Brahmanic, with respect to the worship of Kali. The literary trope of the blood thirsty Goddess gets implicated in the larger gender politics of the novel where Kapalakundala sees the goddess not as an agent of her empowerment but rather as a mystical force that allows her to commit self-sacrifice. Even as Kali remains pre-dominant in the narrative as the embodiment of divine power yet the disjunction between the goddess and the ordinary women is made visible in the narrative. In her critique of goddess worshipping cultures Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has drawn attention to the gap between the symbolic veneration of a goddess and the marginalization of women in terms of the material and historical conditions (Sunder Rajan 35). Kapalakundala’s suicide then reveals the paradox of a blood thirsty Goddess whose status as the embodiment of cosmic power and energy can be pitted against the victimization of her female devotee.

Works Cited

- Kinsley, David. “Freedom from Death in the Worship of Kali.” *Numen* 22.3 (1975) : 183-207. *Jstor*.
 ---. *The Ten Mahavidyas: Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1998.
- Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. “Bankimchandra and the Subjection of Women: Kapalakundala’s Destiny.” *Indian Literature* 31.3 (1988): 161-174. *Jstor*.
- Chatterji, Bankim Chandra. *Kapalakundala*. Trans. Gautam Chakravarty. New Delhi: The Book Review Literary Trust, 2005. Print.
- Kripal, Jeffrey K. “Why the Tantrika Is a hero: Kali in the Psychoanalytic Tradition.” *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*. Eds. Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 2005.
- Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*. Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2001.
- Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari. “Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 33.44 (1998): 34-38. *Jstor*.