

Goddess for our Troubled Times

By Reverend Dr. Sushmita Mukherjee

I will start by reading a poem entitled, "Kali, the Mother," written by Swami Vivekananda.

I'm sure it's a name that many of you are familiar with. Vivekananda was one of the first people who brought classical Hindu thought into the West, when he came to the United States to attend the first Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893.

KALI THE MOTHER

By Swami Vivekananda

The stars are blotted out,
The clouds are covering clouds,
It is darkness vibrant, sonant.

In the roaring, whirling wind
Are the souls of a million lunatics
Just loose from the prison-house,

Wrenching trees by the roots,
Sweeping all from the path.

The sea has joined the fray,
And swirls up mountain-waves,
To reach the pitchy sky.

The flash of lurid light
Reveals on every side
A thousand, thousand shades
Of Death

Begrimed and black —
Scattering plagues and sorrows,
Dancing mad with joy,

Come, Mother, come!

For Terror is Thy name,
Death is in Thy breath,
And every shaking step
Destroys a world for e'er.

Thou "Time", the All-Destroyer!

Come, O Mother, come!

Who dares misery love,
And hug the form of Death,
Dance in Destruction's dance,
To him the Mother comes.

So, friends! This is the mother we invoke today. Her name is *Kali*. The word Kali comes from the Sanskrit root, "*kaala*," which has two meanings. One is "Black, or Dark," and the other meaning is "Time." So, one can think of her as "Dark Time."

When I think of her as "time," I think of her not as our linear, tick-tock clock time, but rather, as circular time. If she had a teaching about life, it would go something like, "anything that is born must die; and anything that dies, must be reborn - in some form, somehow, somewhere." Actually, it is not too different from what we say in modern physics, that energy can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only change forms. And we also know that matter and energy are indeed interconvertible.

So, this is her wisdom – that of the circular time, encompassing eternal cycles of birth, death and rebirth.

As I was contemplating this sermon for today, I thought that the best way to invoke her in this community, would be to tell you a story. To tell you a story of how she was born. And as we tell the story, we will see how her story applies to our lives today.

Our story today opens when heaven, the abode of the gods, has been taken over by the demons. The demons have staged a coup, and the gods have been driven out of heaven.

Let's just take a moment here to think about "gods" and "demons."

If you read descriptions in scripture, or when you see ancient paintings, the gods are described as these beautiful, luminous, magnificent beings. Their skin tone is often described as milky white, or like honey, or like wheat ripened in the sun. They are bejeweled. They wear beautiful clothing. They have gorgeous weapons. Because the gods have dominion over all the worlds, and they can strike anywhere at their whim, you could legitimately call these "weapons of mass destruction!" The gods are the ones who are in control. They are in charge. The ones who run the show.

The demons, on the other hand, are dark, black. Sometimes, they are described as half human and half animal. They often have horns or tails or snouts. They are mostly naked, or almost naked. Their weapons are things like sticks, bows and arrows, or maybe a scythe that you use to harvest rice.

Ring a bell?

Psychologically, to me, it seems like we are speaking about ego and shadow. Ego is the part of us that we identify with as our sense of "I." This is who we think is in control, the one that runs the show, and in those of us who are "socially well-adjusted," it is the one looks to the continuation of *status quo*. On the other hand, our shadow is composed of the things to which we say, "not me!" "This has nothing to do with me! It doesn't exist!" All the things that are dark, ugly and thus, unwelcome. These are our psychological shadow pieces.

Socially, well... I come from a colonized country, or more precisely, an ex-colonized country. So, I see the social shadow as colonization, as slavery, as usurping other people's land, and driving them away from their homes. As terrorizing Mother Earth herself with our hubris.

So, my friends, this is our battlefield. This is the battlefield in which we stand at the beginning of this story.

Now, the gods, of course, want to get heaven back from the demons.

But there's a big problem! It turns out that the king of the demons is actually an adept yogi. His name is *Mahishasura*. The name, *Mahishasura*, is literally composed of two words: "*mahisha*," meaning buffalo, and "*asura*," meaning demon. So, he is named "buffalo demon." He's a shapeshifter. He can sometimes manifest as a buffalo, sometimes he can be a demon. He can change into many other forms as well. It turns out that he has done this long penance, and has prayed to *Brahma*, the Creator, for many eons. Finally, he has propitiated *Brahma*, and has received a boon from him. The boon is no god or man can kill *Mahishasura*.

So, the gods are in a bind! What can they do?

They go to *Brahma*, the Creator, and ask for help.

Brahma can't help because he is the bestower of the boon in the first place. So, they all go to *Vishnu*, the Preserver, and taking him along, they approach *Shiva* to ask for help. *Shiva* is the *yogi* of the gods; so, they hope that maybe he will have an answer. *Shiva* listens to their story. He then goes deep into meditation and comes out of the meditation with a solution. He says, "Okay, I got this! The boon that *Mahishasura* received is that no god or man can kill him. But the boon doesn't say that he cannot be killed by a woman! So, this is what we are going to do. We are going to create a goddess, who will fight the demons on our behalf."

So, all the gods get together. They project their energies into space, and from this collective energy of all the reigning gods, a being emerges. Her name is *Durga*. The name *Durga* comes from a root which means "fortress." In other words, she is invincible. She is impenetrable. *Durga* is sometimes described as "shining like a thousand suns." Her glamour, her luminosity, is akin to a thousand suns, shining together. She has ten arms.

The gods gift her with their best clothing, and their most lavish jewelry. They give her their most powerful weapons, because after all, she is going to be their representative in this war against the demons. Each of her ten arms carries a weapon of the gods. She's given a lion as her mount. Note that it's a lion, carrying leonine energy – the youthful masculine energy in its full glory.

When I imagine *Durga* in this way, I cannot but feel how much she is like many of us – the professional, “successful” women. She is so much like me! She's a “Daughter of the Patriarchy.” She has the blessings of the Fathers. She has the weapons of the Fathers. What the fathers themselves can't do; she's being asked to do. She rides a lion into the battlefield of life, wielding ten weapons simultaneously. She is the quintessential multitasking modern woman! But in the final analysis, she is not, at this point in the story, her own person. She is still an “emissary of the Fathers.”

So, *Durga*, adorned by the gods, and carrying their weapons (which they have used to subdue the demons for an eternity), rides this lion into heaven. And in a voice that resounds in the three worlds like a thunderclap, she says, “Come meet me in the battlefield!”

The demons initially laugh! “What! A woman? That's the best you can do?” But she won't leave heaven. She continues to beat her battle drum, while her lion roars. The noise is deafening.

So the demons relent, and send out their lowest ranking warriors, thinking, “Ah! We don't need to work very hard. After all, she's just a woman!” But of course, she easily kills these demon warriors. Now the demons begin to pay more attention; they send out some of their better-trained warriors. She kills them effortlessly. This goes on and on and on. The battle looks like child's play to her. The gods begin to celebrate. “Okay, heaven's going to be back in our hands shortly! We did a good job, sending in our daughter.” They slap each other's backs. “We did so well! Look, we trained her so well!”

For all intents and purposes, it looks like the gods are going to win the battle.

But the demons have something up their sleeve! They have a secret weapon. And now, they send their secret weapon into the battlefield. It's a demon whose name is *Raktabija*. *Rakta* means blood and *bija* means seed. So, his name is “blood-seed.” And his secret weapon is this. He is just like any other demon, and *Durga* can easily attack and injure him. She can cut with her sword, or her flaying knife. But every time a drop of his blood falls on the ground, a thousand new *Raktabijas* arise. So, actually, her prowess in battle now becomes her problem. The field is soon swarming with *Raktabijas*. There are thousands upon thousands of them. It seems like the tide has turned, and the gods are not going to win the battle after all.

This is a moment of reckoning. *Durga* stops her battle frenzy. She realizes that all the blessings she has received from the Fathers, as a Daughter of Patriarchy, are no longer sufficient. The next solution must come from deep within her own self. Her brows furrow in concentration. Her face reddens in anger and frustration. And from her furrowed brows pops out another

goddess – her dark sister – *Kali*. *Kali* is everything that *Durga* is not. We have described *Durga* before. She has ten arms wielding weapons. She's beautifully dressed, and shines like a thousand suns. *Kali*, on the other hand, is the black, dark one. One of her names is *Maharatri*, the Eternal Night. She's naked. She is ugly, shriveled; with wild, matted hair, and long, pendulous breasts. And the worst of it all is her long, lolling red tongue, from which dribbles of saliva are dripping down. She is everything that *Durga* is not. She is *Durga's* shadow. And now she's been manifested, because that's the only way that something fundamental can change.

The battle resumes. *Durga* is animated again. Now, *Durga* starts to slash at the demon *Raktabija*, and every time a drop of his blood begins to fall, before it can hit the ground, *Kali*, with her long tongue, just laps it up! She picks up *Raktabijas* ten at a time, pops them into her great maw, and laughs her terrible laughter, drunk on the blood of the demons.

Eventually, all the *Raktabijas* are destroyed.

Finally, *Mahishasura*, the king of the demons, rides into the battlefield. A tremendous battle ensues. I am sorry we do not have the time to describe this battle. The descriptions are just gorgeous! But for our purposes, we will just say that even though *Mahishasura* is a consummate warrior, and repeatedly changes forms to evade *Durga's* blows, he is finally bested, and is eventually killed and beheaded by her.

Heaven is regained by the gods, and the sacred conch shell is blown to mark the end of the war, and the beginning of peace, and a new order of being.

So, that's the end of our story.

I want us to take a moment to really see what this story is telling us. Because, on a superficial level, we could say this is a quintessential story of victory of good over evil. I think we'll be wrong if we stopped there. There are a lot of lessons here that are applicable our time today, if only we pause and look deeper into the story.

First, we see that while we can create solutions like *Durga*, who are really well-trained, who have all the necessary weapons, all the techniques and methodology that *status quo* can provide, these solutions are not sufficient to win the war. What must happen is that the shadow, *Kali*, needs to be manifested, and then faced and collaborated with.

The other thing that I find fascinating in this story is that *Kali* is not in the battlefield, not in the picture, until there's an impasse. Until there is no other way for us to go forward in this story, without invoking this being, who completely changes the order of everything. This is often the case in our lives! In AA, one often hears about "hitting rock bottom." *Raktabija* is our rock bottom. *Raktabija* cannot be addressed with just a little bit more force, or just a little bit more willpower.

So, maybe we can take a moment to think about all the places where we have *Raktabija* running rampant in our inner worlds, and in our outer worlds. In our outer world, we can think

about the pandemic, we can think about the wars, the climate crisis, the phobias of all kinds – xenophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia... I mean... we can go on and on and on! Racism, sexism... These are our battlefields, where *Raktabija* is running amuck. It's like every time you try to cut something down, ten thousand of its brethren come up.

On a psychological level, how many of us feel tired, exhausted? We don't have it in us anymore to take that next step, to fight that next battle! We're constantly chasing comfort of some kind. Some place where I can finally rest, and say, "okay! I'm okay." And we don't find it. We then go into depression, we go into anxiety, into social alienation. This is often followed by addiction, to somehow numb the pain. Again, this is *Raktabija* running rampant in our inner battlefields.

When we have reached this stage, psychologically or socially, our only solution, I believe, is to invoke this energy of *Kali*. This energy that is ugly, dark, disgusting, unwelcome. This energy that says that the old order is defunct. It needs to be killed. It needs to be shredded into pieces, so something new can arise. Death that is followed by a rebirth. But a rebirth cannot happen if we leave the current system on life support, whether internal or external.

And that is *Kali's* invitation to us.

The question then really is: are we ready? Are we ready to come face to face with that part of us that we have always said, "Not me! I don't have that in me! I'm not racist. I'm not sexist. I'm not... fill in the blanks..." Are we ready to face what lives in us, that has been shoved deep underground for a very long time, away from the light of our consciousness?

In many ways, *Raktabija* is an image of malignancy. He is really like cancer – one who divides and grows uncontrollably, and chokes out all other life...

We know, both psychologically and socially, this happens when we push something down and down and down, until one day it breaks free. It's like a festering wound that has finally broken open, and we have the blood and pus flowing all around us and inside us.

So, I'll leave you with this final thought about *Kali*.

We all want change. We all want that long arc bending towards justice. But for that to happen, *Kali* tells us, we need to face our own shadows. We cannot be good people doing things to help bad people, or fix bad people, or bad conditions or bad situations. We need to first face what is "bad" in us, without judgment, and accept it as part of our wholeness. Are we ready? That, my friends, is her call to us.

Thank you.