

**THE STYLISTIC STRATEGIES  
OF TWO TEXTS DEDICATED TO THE GODDESS KALI:  
THE CONTRASTED POINTS OF VIEW  
OF THE ELITE AND THE SUBALTERNS**

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The article studies the contrasted religious perceptions of the Goddess Kali by the elite and the subalterns in Bengal. It deals with this subject through the stylistic features of two texts and brings about two different visions of religion, the orthodox and the heterodox.

**Key words:** elite and subalterns, verticality and horizontality, Kali, Bengal, urban and rural, prosopoeia and contrafision.

**INTRODUCTION**

For the Europeans and North-Americans, Kali is a strange deity because she is very different from our conventional representations of motherhood:

*In the West, art and poetry have been exhausted to associate all that is tender and precious with this thought of a woman-worship. The mother plays with the little One, or caresses or nurses Him. Sometimes she even makes her arms a throne, whereupon He sits to bless the world [6. P. 8].*

These lines from Margaret Noble, an Irish visitor in India, who converted to Hinduism under the name of Sister Nivedita and became a Kali devotee in the late XIX century and the early XX century, evoke Italian paintings of the Virgin and also Russian icons even though they stress the religious meaning of the mother-son relation more than the purely human relation.

Kali is very different from Western representations of the mother:

*In the East, the accepted symbol is of a woman nude, with flowing hair, so dark a blue that she seems in colour to be black, four-handed — two hands in the act of blessing, and two holding a knife and bleeding head respectively, — garlanded with skulls, and dancing, with protruding tongue, on the prostrate figure of a man all white with ashes [6. P. 9].*

Sister Nivedita was converted to Hinduism by the philosopher and mystic Vivekananda. He was a source of inspiration for the Nationalist movement in India, especially the high caste intellectuals of Bengal who, in the early XX century, created secret organizations to prepare an insurrection and free their country. She has written a short text in which the Goddess calls her devotees and gives them advice to help them reach the

absolute [6. P. 55—58]. The relation between Kali and the believers can therefore be described as a vertical relation going from the top (the Gods) to the bottom (the human beings), which is similar to the relation created by the revolutionary leaders towards the rank and file.

My intention in this article is to oppose the stylistic strategy of this kind of text and its verticality to the horizontal features of the relations between Kali and her devotees in a text coming from rural mystics of Bengal, men and women who struggled against the colonial State, the upper castes and the landowners to survive and whose revolutionary spirit could not accept any faith which didn't spring from grass-root level. I will therefore compare Sister Nivedita's prosopopeia of Kali and a very popular song and poem, composed a long time ago but still known and sung. The name of the author is also remembered: Sarbananda, a very famous bard and mystic who was part of the heterodox cults dedicated to the Mother-Goddess. These rural expressions of religion in the XVII and XVIII centuries were carried into the urban subaltern culture of the men and women of the XIX century, expelled from their villages by hunger and exploitation, who came to Calcutta or Dacca for work and education for their children [5]. I was given by a Bengali friend the translation of one short extract of the poem which I will use for this study. I translated it into French for the site of the Association for research on India called SARI but the version I present now is also the result of the confrontation of my friend's version to the translation from Bengali made available by Sumanta Benerjee [1. P. 150].

Apart from the resources in Stylistics provided by the works of Bernard Dupriez, a scholar with connections with the Universities of Liège, Paris and Montréal, and by his reputed *Gradus* [2], I will use the concept of agency of the subalterns coming from the Indian subaltern studies created by the pioneering works of Ranajit Guha [3]. These Indian researchers in History and Sociology stress the opposition between the elite whose control of discourses sets the norms of order, progress and liberation and creates the subalterns as people deprived of the possibility to define themselves within the institutional and ideological frame produced by the elite. Nevertheless poor farmers, workers, women, oppressed communities, tribals and Dalits (the untouchables) resist and sometimes revolt, which proves that the subalterns have retained an agency which is the object of the subaltern studies and which will appear in my approach of these two texts on Kali.

## 1. THE VOICE OF THE MOTHER BY SISTER NIVEDITA

*“Arise, My child and go forth a man!”* The **prosopopeia** starts with this **apostrophe** which sets the Goddess as the one who shows the way and the devotee as the Mother's child and the listener. The text is not a dialogue, it is **monological**. The imperative creates a sense of hierarchy which reinforces the Mother/child **metaphor**. Sister Nivedita's English is full of old verbal forms and pronouns. Her text is a case

of **morphological archaism** and an **imitation** of biblical language which suits the character of the Goddess and gives Kali's speech dignity and authority. The discourse is tense, formidable, grave. These features define the speech as an **epiclesis**, which is a communication coming from an energetic superior entity. It provokes a fear termed "awe", a word with a powerful **connotation** of sacredness, which gives the text a quality of beauty mixed with fear called the **sublime**.

The appeal goes on as an **admonition** full of **injunctions** which begin with an **objurgation**, which means a negative conjuration: "Think not life is serious!" Kali doesn't explain the **paradox** which starts her teaching, she just confronts the believer with a **rhetorical question**: "What is destiny but thy Mother's play?" Her superiority and her power are her only answers. They replace explanations on the meaning of life and destiny. The Mother's play makes plans useless. Kali only wants submission from her disciple. To help him to understand her claims she uses a **metaphor** which humiliates him. The child is just her toy. She also has other toys that are frightening: "Know'st thou not that Her toy is a thunderbolt, charged with power to shatter the worlds, at the turn of Her wrist?" This **rhetorical question** is also an **epiclesis** whose function is to prevent any question or dialogue as well as a **suggestion** that the submissive disciple will be lifted to a higher level of consciousness.

Understanding is useless or not required to be a son of the Mother but, if one follows her teachings, one has a chance to kill his ego and, by so doing, reach a high level of freedom and love. The renunciation of plans, meaning, achievements, the countless **paradoxes** uttered by Kali, lead the believer on this hard road. The destruction of the ego is expressed by the **symbols** of the knife, sacrifice, fire, blood, skulls, murder. The reaching of the superior level of life is **apocalyptic**:

*Religion, called by whatever name, has been ever the love of death. But to-day the flame of renunciation shall be lighted in My lands and consume men with a passion beyond control of thought. Then shall My people thirst for self-sacrifice as others for enjoyment. Then shall labour and suffering and service be counted sweet instead of bitter. For this age is great in time, and I, even I, Kali, am the Mother of the nations [6. P. 57].*

Sister Nivedita, as we have already explained, was very close to the secret nationalist organizations of Bengal and, beyond the universal and timeless religious theme of the new life created by a deeper relation to a Deity, we can guess her call to the young Indian men to give their lives for the Nation. Many anticolonial heroes went to death, singing hymns to Kali or reciting the *Baghavat Gita* that required complete unselfish submission to Dharma, the natural and divine order of the world and the duty of the sons towards Mother India. Their destiny had been set by a sacred cause or a divinity as the use of "shall" shows clearly: this verb in its biblical use means that what is bound to happen will surely come. Heavens, Gods, Nation, Destiny, Moral duties and revolutionary values take hold of men's lives.

This verticality is strongly opposed by Sarbananda's prayer to Kali.

## 2. ADDRESS TO THE MOTHER BY SARBANANDA

*Tears trickle down my chest.  
Mother, you are the daughter of a rich man!  
Father, you are the son of a rich man!  
But you only own a buffalo and a bag of hemp.  
I can't make head or tail of your gifts.  
He drinks poison and you hold a skull  
And some more skulls as a necklace.  
You live where corpses burn.  
Without clothes one is naked.  
The owner of the trident is starving.  
He falls on his bottom when supposed to dance [5. P. 69].*

A few explanations are necessary to understand this poem that is also a prayer. The skulls evoke Kali as we already know and the trident, the hemp, the poison, the cremation grounds refer to Shiva. As the God of destruction and regeneration, he might appear on the places dedicated to the burning of corpses. The poison also refers to this God: it is an element of the myth of the purification of the Gods' nectar by Shiva who drank all the poison contained in the sacred liquid. The symbolical elements of the poem are **allusions** to these two Gods' symbols and myths. This information is scattered in the text without any detailed explanation. The poem therefore appears rather **elliptic** and this strange and even weird accumulation of religious symbols and sequences of myths seems at first sight rather chaotic. It sounds like the disturbed speech of a mad man or a drunkard. Actually the story goes that the poet, when he uttered his prayer, was so drunk and starving that he fainted [1. P. 148].

Gods as beggars, and a prayer obsessed by food and drugs and told by a drunkard instead of a mystic intoxicated by divine love is a reversal of the norms of religious poetry. This **inversion** brings the divine characters and saints down to earth. The contrast between the lofty and the earthly, the spirit and the body, heaven and life below is called **bathos**. Its function is to break the verticality of mystic poetry to celebrate human needs, pleasures and desires. The starving God falling on his backside instead of performing some sacred dancing is a very powerful example of this stylistic device. Intoxication by alcohol and drugs like hemp that Shiva carries in his bag, must also sustain the hungry body and the doubting mind of the poet. They are used by the subaltern devotees of the heterodox cults dedicated to Kali. The body is central in these unconventional forms of devotion. The orgasm (*birishti* in Bengali) evokes the original creative act of the Gods. It is not only a worldly pleasure but also a moment of communion with the creation and the Creator. It is therefore a prayer. Faith is as much connected to the body as it is to the spirit, perhaps more. A Mother like Kali should take care of her son's body and be happy if drugs help him to forget pain and hunger and even to overcome his doubts about her caring love. Spirituality might be essential for the well fed Brahmins but for the poor subalterns faith cannot exist without the body. In this poem horizontality prevails on verticality.

The poet was on the verge of fainting like Shiva whose diet seems limited to poisoned food. Kali is as poor as the poet if her necklace is a string of skulls. She is always represented naked, so she must be a pauper. Shiva only owns a buffalo, not even a cow. The first animal is associated with farming and the second with the priestly caste, the Brahmins. Recently a Dalit essay has celebrated the courageous and hardworking buffalo against the sacred cow. Such **connotations** present Kali and Shiva as deities of the class and caste of the poet. This **parallel** between the Gods and the poet is also brought about by Sarbananda's bewilderment at the **paradox** that Kali and Shiva are so poor in spite of having, as Gods should have, rich and powerful parents. The poet's irony is what is called **contrafision**, a kind of cruel irony that sometimes goes along with **catabasis**, an insistence on humiliations (like nakedness and the ridiculous fall) which pervades the whole text.

The poet pretends that the Gods are likely to be as poor as he is and he proves it by the fact that they obviously cannot help him. But who would imagine divine beings as beggars? The text reveals a hidden truth through the device of **antanaclosis**: the naïve devotee's belief that the Gods are poor is but the speech of a simpleton who, unwillingly, when taken over by less naïve readers or listeners, accuses Kali and Shiva of passivity and lack of concern for the poor. The text is close to the **antitrope** which means the opposite of what it pretends to say: the poet's concern for the starving deities is really an **accusation**: what is a powerful Goddess like Kali doing against poverty?

We must admit that the arguments of this text are not as serious as Sister Nivedita's. The poem is a **parody** of a prayer as much as a true prayer. It is much more dialogical than the other text and it is so thanks to a feature of the text called **asteismus**, that is to say a mock argument composed of critical statements thrown against someone who is more an accomplice than an enemy. Sarbananda knows more about Kali than his narrator and he is sure that he can bring her down to earth. He even suspects that she'll be amused and moved by his apparently naïve but actually witty and crafty approach. He also wants the audience to react to his statements and he thinks that it is possible because the poet and his audience agree. The **asteismus** can only be used when there is a hidden but nevertheless strong relation between the people who are arguing. The **phatic function** is most important for this stylistic device and it makes a **cataphasis** possible, which means that the text simultaneously says something and its contrary: Kali is too poor to help the poet and she can do it or she doesn't listen to the poet's prayer and she will give him an answer or she doesn't care for poor humans and she will stand by them... It is a device used in the biblical book of *Job* where it is said that Job is nothing compared to God and that God cares for his creatures or that Job is too bold when he accuses God and perfectly right to do so.

Sabarnanda's discourse is not closed on itself. It is humorous, it plays with the destiny (the Gods), the listeners (the audience), the forms and the codes and uses myths and religious symbols. The repetition of these elements of Bengal's traditional religious culture in such a dialogical and disturbing text is a **diaporesis**, which suggests, through changes of context and treatment, that an enlarged and renewed mean-

ing should be ascribed to them. The poem can therefore be compared to a living organism which throws pseudopods that will enable it to go further and explore new configurations.

The two texts use arguments, clichés, symbols, stories coming from myths which are parts of the treasury of religious forms and are endlessly repeated, but these repetitions are very different in Kali's call to her devotees and Sarbananda's poem. In the first text, they are reminders, that is to say that their function is to bring back the devotee to the everlasting values and attitudes imposed by the Mother. They have to be repeated so that through their stern and hard teaching the follower of Kali is led towards the rebirth promised to whoever overcomes the limitations of the ego. In the poem the repetitions are uttered in different contexts and often voluntarily misunderstood or twisted in order to confront religious beliefs to the life of the subalterns and the many changes they have to cope with. This strategy modifies the religious values and attitudes. They go through a transmutation. The relations between the devotee and Kali become dialogical. The parodic elements make the repetitions more creative as they are no longer repetitions of the same but an opening to the other thanks to the diaporesis which renews and enlarges the traditional and rigid meanings of culture.

### CONCLUSIONS

The first text is clearly vertical and the second horizontal and they can respectively be ascribed to the elite and the subalterns. The discourses of the elite and the subaltern can influence each other but the elitist voice that dominates and stifles the subaltern voices will nevertheless remain unable to assimilate them because they are related to an experience of life which can only be apprehended by those who experience it from birth. There is hardly any dialogue between these two trends. Each one ignores the other that is seen as an inferior cultural strata or as the hypocritical and senseless discourse of the dominating group. Sometimes an artist or prophet coming from the elite can feel, like Tagore or Tolstoi, that the subaltern cultures produce people whose resilience and ability to understand life and face death are superior, but most of the time these individuals are hailed as saints who cannot be imitated or very unconventional personalities who could be tolerated but should not be imitated. I do believe that Sarbananda's horizontal approach of religion and life can be very enlightening. Machiavelli was neither a saint nor an original but he thought that the resistance of the subalterns and the ability of the Roman Republic to accept the reality and the expression of conflicting relations between elite and subalterns provided a path to the expression of the common will of the Romans [4].

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**СТИЛИСТИЧЕСКИЕ СТРАТЕГИИ ДВУХ ТЕКСТОВ,  
ПОСВЯЩЕННЫХ БОГИНЕ КАЛИ:  
КОНТРАСТ ТОЧЕК ЗРЕНИЯ БЕНГАЛЬСКОЙ ЭЛИТЫ  
И НИЗЩИХ СЛОВ ОБЩЕСТВА**

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В статье исследуются контрасты восприятия богини Кали элитой общества и его низшими слоями в бенгальском языке. Контраст рассматривается на материале стилистических характеристик двух текстов и позволяет обосновать два различных религиозных видения: общепринятое, ортодоксальное и нетрадиционное, неортодоксальное.

**Ключевые слова:** элита и подчиненные, вертикаль и горизонталь, Кали, бенгали, городской и деревенский, urban and rural, персонификация и конрарность.