

https://dspace.org/

Images of Kali as reflections of female defiance within selected examples of contemporary Asian arts

Chhiba, Reshma Daya

2013-08-12
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/13032

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

To She, who is the eternal light

The eternal darkenss,

To She who is both the great Goddess

And the great Demoness,

To She, whose menacing laughter and terrifying scream

reverberates like the bellowing of a thousand she-jackals,

To She, who roams the cremation grounds

And straddles the dormant Shiva,

My humblest salutations to

The Defiant and Divine Feminine

- Reshma Chhiba, 2013

Contents

Introduction…….3-12

Chapter One: Kāli and Her Manifestations……..….13-24

Chapter Two: The Dance of Kāli……..25-35

Chapter Three: The Representation of Kāli in the work of Sutapa Biswas

and Chila Kumari Burman……....36-47

Chapter Four: My Dance with Kāli……..48-67

Conclusion: The work of Amar Kanwar.....……68-74

Reference list……..…75-77

Image reference list…….……...…78

Images of works from *Kali* (2008): Practical component……....79-103

Addendum A…….…..104-105

Introduction

The ferocious face of the black goddess of the Dakshineshwar temple in Calcutta, India imprints itself on my retina, leaving a rapturous after image. From a halo of silver flames and an eruption of red garlands emerges the beautiful and mysteriously radiant goddess Kāli. From the deep and vast blackness of her face emerge her predatory yet compassionate eyes, drawing me into her, and filling me with awe. Framed in redness, the whites of her eyes and the blackness of her pupils hold and captivate me as I stare devotedly into her striking face. Her white teeth gleam against her blood-stained and dripping tongue which protrudes in a manner that is challenging and teasing at the same time. At the centre of her forehead her brightly opened third eye flashes, reminding me of her fabled supremacy and inner wisdom. Her forehead and body are bedecked with golden jewels and red and yellow flowers. Her nose is delicately decorated with a beautiful and elaborate nose ring as a reminder of Indian femininity. Two of her four red stained hands show gestures of blessing and protection while the others hold objects of gruesomeness: a severed male body and a blood-stained scythe. She stands upon the chest of the supine male god Shiva, her consort. Her stance is confrontational; she is creator, protector and destroyer. Nonetheless, I am euphoric with love and bliss as I stare at the great mother Kāli, the majestic and powerful feminine.

This dissertation sets out to examine how images of the Hindu goddess Kāli have been used traditionally as a symbol of female defiance and have been embraced for those inherent characteristics by certain contemporary Indian woman artists. Kāli is usually seen as the embodiment of the wild, untamed side of human nature. She is most often represented as semi-naked, and wears a girdle of human arms as a skirt, and a necklace of human skulls or heads. Her hair is unbound and dishevelled; her outstretched tongue drips with blood, evident of her aggressive temperament and suggestive of her erotic sexuality as a goddess.

Common perceptions of Hindu societies and culture embrace and promote notions of women as modest, passive and subservient. Men dominate in both the home and the community. Whilst this is not true for all homes, it should be noted that even in the 21st century, many Hindu women are still treated as the possessions of men. The oppressiveness of patriarchy in Hindu culture is reflected in the lives of many Hindu women. One of the most outspoken of these women is Phoolen Devi, who in her autobiography, *I, Phoolen Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen,* states, "I had enough of the rule that made women silent victims who had to accept the will of men"(Devi 1997, p. 170). Earlier in the book, she writes, "Being a girl meant being even lower, a girl didn't exist without her father, her brother, her uncle or her husband or any man at all belonging to the family or cast" (Devi 1997, p. 36). This oppressiveness within Hindu culture dates back to the epic of *Mahabharata* (approximately 8th century BCE), which is one of the greatest tales of the human condition within

Hinduism. It is in fact the moral blue print by which many Hindus continue to live. In this tale the queen Draupadi is forced to marry five brothers, and is subsequently 'lost' by her eldest husband in a game of dice. She is treated as a mere possession. This ethos, which contradicts the Vedic idea of reverence for women, seems to justify the patriarchal treatment of Hindu women within traditional societies.

My subject position is that of a second generation South African born woman with Indian ancestry and adherence to Hindu custom. I want to speak to this experience of womanhood, and propose that, in spite of the perceptions of women as subservient and passive, there is a place within the very tradition of Hindu society for the expression of female defiance. This space of defiance is personified in the form of the goddess Kāli. In addition to this, I will analyse my own artistic work, which utilises images of Kāli with the aim of producing empowering images of Indian women, locating this analysis within a the particular context of South African contemporary art.

My personal South African Indian ancestry dates back to the 1950's when my grandparents moved here from India. When they came to this country they lived in tight-knit communities with people they had travelled with, fellow immigrants from the very same village in Gujarat, India. Both my maternal and paternal grandparents chose to settle in what was then known as Transvaal. Unlike many South African Indians, I have no ties to KwaZulu Natal (then called "Natal"). Living in a foreign land, with foreign languages, they held onto the traditions brought with them, hoping that this would keep the community together. Many of the customs to which they adhered were patriarchal, where the male partner dominated in the home and male individuals dominated in the community. Women stayed home to look after their many children while men worked. Sometimes they worked away from home, which meant that they would only see their families over weekends. Yet even in the absence of the male household head, the family understood that it was he who held the power in the home. Men of this generation grew up being looked after by their women, a situation in which it was expected that everything would be done for them and that they had the final say on every subject.

This isolation was further perpetuated by the Group Areas Act under the apartheid law, which kept Indian communities living together and isolated from other cultural groups for many years. While this ostensibly had some benefits in that it helped entrench certain religious and cultural beliefs, it also prevented the community from ultimately integrating in the country in which they had settled. Young girls were groomed to become housewives, to look after their husbands and their husband's family, and this expectation still lingers within certain communities, even if a woman works outside of the home too. Young boys were often taken into the family business with their fathers, or given the opportunity to be educated where possible.

In post-apartheid South Africa it is therefore not uncommon to find the patriarchal system exemplified in 1950's living still determining the social dynamics in many Indian homes. Even with more Indian women being educated, there is still an underlying condescending tone towards women in these communities. I myself have experienced this often within my family and community. While the men of my generation are slowly outgrowing their adherence to the cliché that "a women's place is in the kitchen", there is still difficulty in finding ways to keep those traditions alive which are still relevant to contemporary society, and attempting to address a balance within these changing gender positions. Post-apartheid South Africa gave many of my generation the opportunity to experience and undertake things my parents never had the opportunity to, but, it has also given us the challenge of trying to find a way to assimilate to a western culture, while still holding onto relevant traditions from our Indian ancestry. It is this system of beliefs, cultural practices, and the adaptation of and challenge to both, that this dissertation engages with, addresses and critiques.

Contrary to how the South African Hindu society functions, the core philosophy within Hinduism is the understanding that male and female energies reside within every being, that one aspect does not exist without the other and that there is a constant duality and balance of these energies. It is also believed that women are the prosperity or are said to be the wealth of the home and should be treated with love and respect. An example of this duality is the image of Shiva in the form of *Ardhanareshwara* (fig. 3), in which he and the goddess take on the form of an androgynous being that is half male and half female. Shiva, the male energy, is consciousness while *Shakti*[1], the female energy, is primordial. For Shiva to become kinetic consciousness he must be empowered by *Shakti*. Without *Shakti*, Shiva's consciousness is dormant, but when awakened by his *Shakti*, the "cosmos [is] moved from mental construct to constructed reality" (Ashley-Farrand 2003, p.53).

The feminine aspect of consciousness in Hinduism is called *shakti*, a Sanskrit word which directly translates as primordial energy. *Shakti* is believed to be the life force of every being and everything in the universe. To contextualise this point further I will briefly relate the Hindu creation myth, the female or *shakti* is a key player in this tale:

> In the realm beyond laws of physics, beyond the minds of humans, beyond the ken of any save the most highly advanced spiritual adept, lies a reality completely different from the one we inhabit. There, a divine being, actually the essence of "Being", called Narayana, sleeps. Narayana exists in a realm governed by another type of mental activity altogether different from the one in which we currently live. But as Narayana slumbers, this four-armed

[1] *Shakti* translates as primordial energy. It is believed that shakti, the female aspect of consciousness according to Hinduism, is the life force of every being and everything in the universe. When someone speaks of *shakti*, he/she is speaking of the female aspect of divinity. This aspect of divinity is believed to be all pervading, and it is even believed that any male aspect of divinity is a mere corpse without *shakti*.

androgynous being prepares to create our universe. By his very dreams, he generates the stuff of our universe, where we will be players in a divine drama acted out over billions of years.

As this particular dream opens, a lotus flower blossoms from Narayana's navel, and starts to grow. It grows and morphs until it resembles an egg in the middle of a flower from which ultimately hatches the four-faced masculine being called Brahma. Brahma represents Mind, within him- that is, within primordial mind, or consciousness- stirs an overwhelming urge to create and multiply. Just as Narayana represents Being, Brahma is Mind. Within him, now, the Desire to propagate appears. From Mind comes Desire.

But before Brahma can do anything about his desire, two demons emerge from the ear of the sleeping Narayana. Spying Brahma, who has only half emerged from out of his birth lotus, the demons gleefully decide to exhibit the dark side of their nature. Brahma is fully conscious of his vulnerable position. He knows that something terrible may happen to him at any moment, and he yells to the sleeping Narayana to awaken and protect him. For a second, nothing happens and Brahma watches, horror-stricken, as the demons start to make their way over to where he rests in the flower as Narayana's navel.

But just then, a large radiant feminine figure arises out of the form of Narayana. Although he still slumbers, the feminine figure seems to come directly from Narayana's dormant body. Observing Brahma and the encroaching demons, she speaks. " Well, what have we here!"

"Help, help", cries Brahma. " I am threatened by those two evil figures before I am formed. Please, wake up Narayana so that I can be saved."

The radiant feminine figure turns to the demons, who have now halted in their tracks. Briefly contemplating the situation, she muses, " I see."

"Oh, Great Mother," one of the demons speaks quickly, " we mean nothing, really."

"Oh, yes they do," gushes Brahma. " They mean me great harm, and I beg protection."

"I understand what is going on here," says the feminine figure to the demons. " I must protect this blossoming one from you two."

"We will make no harm. " the demons instantly reply. " Just send us far, far away. You wouldn't kill us when we haven't actually done anything, would you?"

"Destroy them quickly," Brahma pleads, " before they attack even you."

Considering a moment, the feminine figure decides: " The sleeping Narayana has created you all. His dream will be the stuff of a new universe and there you shall all contend with one another in due course of time. For now, I command that when the universe has completed its first, etheric phase of creation, you demons shall go to the farthest reaches of that place. It will take you a long time to come back to the centre of things. Meanwhile, I offer shelter and protection to you, Brahma, while you finish your act of creation."

As the demons mutter to themselves, Brahma supplicates the feminine figure with joined palms. "Great Mother, who are you? I must know the name of my savior and benefactor."

She replies, "I am the spouse of he who slumbers. I am his feminine self, his energy, his wisdom, and all power that he manifests in any form whatsoever. I am called Lakshmi. As I am to Narayana whose dream this is, I shall also be your power and all energy and power of this creation of yours. For you, I shall manifest as Saraswati, she who is self-contained, self-aware, and with full knowledge of that which you will create. I shall be your divine speech that you will use to create anything and everything. As your feminine aspect, Saraswati, I give you the power to create."

Brahma found that while Lakshmi was speaking, he continued to grow and emerge from the lotus. Now that he was finally free from the flower, he beheld a different radiant feminine form. At his side, Saraswati, the embodiment of Divine Speech, looked at him with eyes that contained infinity and melted into him from head to toe. Brahma smiled. He remembered the desire he had only begun to experience when the demons appeared and disturbed his thoughts. He closed his eyes and hummed a vibrant, reverberating tone. The note hung in the blackness for a second, and then sprouted into a bubble that grew and grew, becoming larger and larger in no time at all.

> At that precise moment, a ball of light emerged from the sleeping Narayana. It entered the bubble and shattered into millions of sparks of light. Some pieces were bigger than others, but a majority of the multitude of splinters of light were about the same size. They would be the souls, the various forms of man that would become the people of the new universe that was, even now, in the process of becoming.
>
> Just as Narayana is Being and Brahma is Mind, the great feminine energy Saraswati is Brahma's shakti, his power. She "speaks" a great idea through his mental conception and the cosmos is born. Creatures of every form and description come onto existence, and the play of the universe unfolds (Ashley-Farrand 2003, p. 28-32).

Therefore, Hindus believe that all beings are comprised of masculine and feminine. The universe is in harmony and balance because of this. The two manifestations of s*hakti* spoken about in this tale, that is, Lakshmi and Saraswati, are of the more gentle type, but all manifestations are essentially aspects of a collective whole. I have introduced two of the three main manifestations of s*hakti* and their male counterparts. The third of these three is called Parvati, who is the consort of Shiva. Shiva, in Hindu mythology is revered as the Destroyer, while Brahma is the creator and Narayana or Vishnu, the preserver.

In speaking against patriarchy I will make reference to two contemporary female artists with Indian ancestry, Sutapa Biswas and Chila Kumari Burman, both of whom are Indian women living and working in Britain. Both artists acknowledge that the goddess Kāli in some senses inspires and informs their production; however, both have been categorised as working from the point of view of a "black woman artist" or the "other" within imperialist Britain. My focus will hone in on a single work by each artist which uses Kāli imagery or reference to speak against British patriarchy. Biswas and Kumari Burman have recognised the empowering position of Kāli and demonstrate a certain kind of defiance in their portrayal of her, whether directly (Biswas) or obliquely (Kumari Burman). Moreover, the ways in which they demonstrate this defiance relates to their contexts of being of Indian ancestry in a British milieu. Biswas and Kumari Burman have adopted and adapted images from traditional Hindu mythology not only to comment on the oppressive gender relations of Hindu cultures under patriarchy more generally but also as a means to symbolise female power and assert female sexuality. Furthermore, they challenge the oppressive social and cultural climate of British hegemon, and engage with and transform traditional images and ideas about Kāli and locate these within a contemporary metropolitan culture.

I will examine Sutapa Biswas's *Housewives with Steak-Knives* (fig.9) as one of my primary examples. Biswas places Kāli in what seems to be a contemporary domestic setting and in doing so attributes human qualities to the goddess. I will also examine four black and white photographs from a series called *Shotokan* (fig.11) by Chila Kumari Burman. These images are somewhat autobiographical in that the artist portrays herself as an aggressive, powerful Indian woman, who, when presented in the

framework of this discussion, seems very closely associated with the goddess Kāli in spirit if not in iconographical particulars.

Both Sutapa Biswas and Chila Kumari Burman acknowledge the assertive, aggressive and disruptive aspects of the female that manifests as Kāli. The image of Kāli is adapted and transformed in this work to the extent that Kāli begins to represent resistance to the subservience of contemporary Indian women in their day-to-day lives, within a British context. I have relied on single works by these artists because they become emblematic of how Kali is used by contemporary artists of Indian ancestry. Both are extremely rich images to decode and analyse.

Given the scope of this thesis, to focus in detail on these two works should open a critical space to engage the themes of my research more generally, and provide a framework against which I can analyse my own creative endeavour. The main focus of the thesis is how Kāli is used in contemporary visual art as an empowering symbol. It is not an in-depth look at the work of the above-mentioned artists or patriarchy. It will therefore only focus on the two works that epitomise my concern, although I will look at certain other examples of their practice that seem supportive of my focus.

By comparing and contrasting my work to that of Biswas and Kumari Burman I hope to present a case for contemporary art in South Africa that raises awareness of the potential of Kāli for expressing defiance within contemporary South African Hindu society. My work focuses on experiences I have had as an Indian woman living in post-apartheid South Africa. In these experiences, Kāli has come to represent for me an influential and aggressive image of assertive womanhood, both within and outside the Indian community. Adopting this assertive role in and through my art is a key motivation for my practice. My mediums of expression are painting and photography, and both offer specific ways to give visual form to my ideas. These visual forms do not rely exclusively on Kāli iconography; Kāli is invoked rather as a kind of abstract energy or mind-set.

There is a lack of reference to Kāli as a force of female defiance within the context of contemporary South African art. Due to previous political climates and the lack of access to tertiary education, there are very few Indian artists in South Africa. Most Indians who were fortunate enough to have access to tertiary education under apartheid law opted for economically secure careers such as accounting, law or medicine. This meant that even those Indians who practiced art would more than likely have done so, as a hobby, or were active in politics, with art merely as a means to speak about the current political climate. This is exemplified in the case of Fatima Meer, whose works in the Constitution Hill collection reveal her time in prison. Most Indian women at the time were expected to fulfil the roles of mother and wife which meant that access to tertiary education, let alone a career in the arts, was scarcely available to them. Culturally Indians saw it more beneficial to either run their own family

businesses or follow one of the above mentioned career paths. Given this cultural climate and patriarchal constraints, women of that time were left with very limited options. In 2012 there are still very few Indians, particularly Indian women, who work in the art sector on a professional level[2].

This lack of Kāli iconography within contemporary South African art is also due to a lack of the Indian voice and perhaps a lack of interest in this particular subject. Even when present, images of Kāli are rarely provocative or consciously produced as a sign of female defiance. An example of this practice would be the work of Nirupa Singh. Singh's work was shown at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2004. Her works, mainly prints, were references to the *Devi*, a Hindu word for goddess. These illustrations however did not challenge any patriarchal systems or show the goddess as a defiant female in any way. However, Biswas and Kumari Burman have produced images and ideas that present this goddess in critical or stimulating ways, ways which would be productively engaged in an attempt to develop an awareness of Kāli as a vehicle through which local Indian artists might express defiance. My intention is to shift notions of Kāli and representations of the goddess both within South African art and the local Hindu community. It is in confronting the patriarchal system within a South African context that I have found the use of Kāli iconography and reference to be an ideal mode of communicating female defiance. I am unequivocally aware that my interest in the goddess is not shared by many people within Hindu culture and the contemporary art world and this may also be a reason for the lack of research about her iconography and seen as esoteric within a South African context. However, with more women, both Indian and otherwise, looking for spaces in which assertiveness is encouraged, I use Kāli as an image to mobilise women in the wasteland of the abuse of women in South Africa.

In deciphering the signs and symbols of the sexuality of the goddess I will look at a commonly known illustration (fig.4) of the goddess, an 18th century brass (fig.5) from Orissa in which Kāli sits upon Shiva in a state of sexual union and lastly I will make reference to two 16th century Indian sculptures (fig. 6 and 7) of the goddess in her cosmic dance. The 16th century sculptures portray her in stylized dance postures, in which she holds specific hand gestures or *hastas*, and ornaments and weapons in her hands. Any reference to Kāli would need to take into account gesture and dance formations as specific enactments of defiance. The portrayal of Kāli as defiant is accessible through Kāli in the living presence of dance, and this already codified language is transformed into sculpture. These images are drawn on indirectly in the work of Biswas and Kumari Burman, and very directly in my own production. I will dissect aspects of the gestures and postures that seem crucial to Kāli in the language of my own work, as well as in certain instances within Biswas and Kumari Burman's works.

[2] Presently women like Usha Seejarim and Faiza Galdhari are active Indian female artists within the contemporary South African visual art scene.

Classical Indian dance is presently a dying art form in South Africa. With Bollywood dance and other popular culture practices replacing traditional forms of Indian movement as the preferred 'Indian culture', I feel it is important to highlight how deeply rooted the aspect of dance and folk theatre is within Indian culture. The classical style of movement is the site of defiance that Kāli has carried through centuries of ancient Hindu wisdom. Classical Indian dance derives its gesture and posture from an ancient text called the *Natya Shastra*, sometimes referred to as the 5th Veda. In classical Indian dance gesture, or *hasta*, and movement, or *bheda*, along with mime or *abhinaya*, are used as story-telling tools to relate tales from Hindu mythology. The sculptures that I intend drawing on as references are based on the iconography taken from what I have learnt as a trained Bharata Natyam[3] dancer. Aside from my own interest in dance, there has always been a deep-rooted connection between Classical Indian dance and Classical Indian sculpture. I also intend to draw on aspects of the folk dance style of Kerala called *Mutiyettu,* which locates Kāli worship, through performance, within contemporary Indian society in that particular region.

This folk dance style or theatre is based solely on the goddess Kāli, or Bhagavati, as she is known in this part of India. In her book *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and the worship of the Goddess Kāli,* Sarah Caldwell gives an in-depth exploration of the art of *Mutiyēttu*, and also looks at the people, specifically the women, of this region and how they view the goddess. It is important to note that this anthropological reading of the goddess Kāli by Caldwell has been used as a key text in my dissertation. Not only as a reference to *Mutiyettu*, but also to have a broader understanding of Kāli worship in this particular region of India.

The discussions about Kerala and the *Mutiyettu* performance are based solely on Caldwell's findings at that particular time, and I am aware that systems may have changed and that the practice of this folk theatre may not be as prominent today.

Kāli represents a certain kind of empowered female sexuality, within both Western and Eastern patriarchy and feminism. She becomes a symbol of female defiance because she is aggressive and forceful and embraces her heated sexuality - something generally frowned upon within the local Hindu society. However, Kāli can be seen as embodying a resistance to patriarchy, which can fall into a feminist paradigm. I will refer to relevant feminist texts in this instance. While examining the historical and mythological manifestations of Kāli I will also draw on particular ideas advanced by Hilary Robinson and Griselda Pollock[4]. Both Robinson and Pollock state that feminism is not linked

[3] Bharata Natyam is one of the seven classical dance styles of India. I have been studying this art form for the past 21 years.
[4] Both renowned for the extensive contribution to feminist theory particularly within visual arts.

to a single theory but is rather a response to the artist's cultural and social situation and I make a case for this as is evident in the work of Biswas, Kumari Burman and my own.

The position of both Robinson and Pollock is reinforced by the awareness of the danger of essentialising women's experiences across cultures. In this research gender will be the focus of analysis but ethnic identities will inflect gender analysis according to perspectives of local culture. For this ethnic aspect, I will draw on *Beyond the Boundaries: The Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain* by Gilane Tawadros.

In chapter one I will focus on the Goddess Kāli, her history, manifestations, the mythologies that surround her and the symbolism as derived from many sources. I will start off with a brief introduction of *Shakti*, her many forms and her role in the creation myth. I will then give a detailed description of the goddess Kāli and her symbolism according to various texts, both Tantric and Vedic. Important tales will be highlighted in this chapter.

Chapter two will focus on the dance aspect of Kāli where gesture/*hasta* and movement/*bheda* will be analysed as a way of representing Kāli as defiant. For this I will comparatively look at the two 16th century Indian sculptures, in terms of gesture/*hasta*, movement/*bheda*, gaze and stance. I will then introduce the folk dance and theatre *Mutiyettu* in which Kāli is the primary focus as a fierce, destructive female energy, and thus aids in portraying her as a defiant female form. The signs, symbols and iconography looked at here will be compared to that spoken about in chapter one. Kāli as manifest in a folk dance style will be compared to images of her in classical forms of movement in the sculptures. Drawing some information from the folk dance I intend discussing the sexuality of the goddess Kāli. Her sexuality plays an important role in defining her as a defiant goddess and comes across very prominently in this folk theatre.

Chapter three will focus on the pastel drawing *Housewives with Steak Knives* by Sutapa Biswas and the four black and white images called *Shotokan* by Chila Kumari Burman. While I will take into account the artists' own interpretations and intentions of the works, most of my analysis will be framed by feminist theory, particular drawing on the ideas of Hilary Robinson, Gilane Tawadros, Griselda Pollock and Lynda Nead.

The final chapter will focus on my own artistic production. I will analyse my work in relation to its similarities to and differences from the works of Sutapa Biswas and Chila Kumari Burman. I will explore the power of sign and symbol, and materiality and iconography in a way that portrays the defiant aspect of the female as epitomised by the goddess Kāli. I hope to reflect on how Kāli's

defiance might represent the desires of women in a broader context and also give power to alternative identities for women (both Indian and other) in South Africa.

In conclusion I will briefly discuss the work *Lightening Testimonies* by Indian documentary film maker Amar Kanwar, shown at Documenta 12, 2007. This is a very intricate piece of eight video projections that focus on the theme of sexual violence against women in India. As I analyse this work it will become apparent that Kāli and the idea of defiance is extremely active within modern day India. Here the placement of the Kāli principle is in a contemporary, real life situation as opposed to the many mythical tales that I will explore in this dissertation.

While this research does look at many aspects of the goddess, I must qualify that this is in no way an in-depth study into the goddess and her many manifestations. This study uses the images and illustrations mentioned above as a mode to position the goddess Kāli as the defiant female in relation to my work and my particular position in contemporary South Africa. There are also many other contemporary Indian and other artists who use the image of Kāli who have not been mentioned in this discussion. This exclusion is deliberate as I believe that not all are relevant to my particular stand-point. Some of my readings are informed by western perspectives of the goddess, however these do not feature as important aspects of this research. There has been so much research about Kāli by western scholars during the last century that the inclusion of all this would have shifted the focus of my research. I have therefore simply touched on the aspects that are relevant to this dissertation.

Chapter 1

Kāli and Her Manifestations

The focus of this chapter is the various descriptions of the Goddess Kāli that are relevant to my research. Kāli's visual manifestations, the myths that shape her existence and the symbolism as derived from many sources, are all important in establishing the framework of this study. The key image that I will be referencing (fig.4) is a circa 18th century gouache on paper from Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, which depicts Kāli in the annihilation aspect of *Shakti*. She stands upon Rati and Kāma, who personify the primordial desire which gives rise to all creation (Mookerjee & Khanna 1977, p. 83). The image is central both to this study and to my artistic production.

In her book *The Book of Kali,* Seema Mohanty speaks of the origins of Kāli and explains that the Goddess only rose to a position of importance in the sixth century, when she was described in great detail in the *Devi Mahatmaya* (Mohanty 2004). However, the first mention of Kāli was in the fifth century; she is described as one of the seven tongues of Agni (the god of fire) in the *Mundaka Upanishad* (Mohanty 2004). The image of Kāli with which scholars and devotees are familiar today first appeared much later, in the seventeenth century, when she became popular in goddess-based devotion in Bengal (Mohanty 2004).

The name "Kali" is a Gujarati and Hindi word that is derived from the Sanskrit word "kala". Kala means "time". In Gujarati and Hindi, the word "kali" translates as "black". In some sacred verses Kali is described as "Kala Ratri", "Kala" meaning time and "ratri" meaning night. If one were to look at night from a sensory or visual perspective it could represent darkness, blackness or the unseen. This association is reiterated in visual representations of the goddess by the darkness of Kāli's skin, which is said to be black or extremely dark. This explains the physical quality of blackness that devotees associate with her. I will discuss this in greater detail later in this chapter.

This association between Kali and time makes her invariably the goddess who represents the control of time, past, present and future. She thus represents creation and, seemingly paradoxically, also becomes the goddess of destruction and death. In certain Eastern philosophies, time is often depicted as a ruthless phenomenon, which devours all that appears in its path. It takes away our youth and ultimately our lives. However, as Thomas Ashley-Farrand notes in his book *Shakti Mantras*, it is believed that the only thing more ruthless than "kala" is Kāli. Kāli thus comes to be seen as the goddess who rules over time. Devotees believe that her black skin represents the void, the essence of the universe, the place from which all energy is born and to which it ultimately returns. Thus Kāli controls time.

In the *Maha Nirvana Tantra* Shiva[5] praises Kali as follows:

> At the dissolution of things, it is kala that will devour all. But it is Kāli that devours even time, the original form and devourer of all things. Resuming yourself after the great dissolution, you retain your nature, dark and devoid of form. There, you remain ineffable and inconceivable. Source of all forms, you are the multiform power of *Maya* (illusion), the beginning of all, creatrix, protectress, and destructess. (Ashley-Farrand 2003, p.128)

In this quote Shiva talks about "the dissolution of things". According to Hinduism it is believed that humanity is currently in the "age of destruction" or *kali yuga.*[6] This is believed to be the last of the four ages within the Hindu structure of time and existence. It is believed that once this age has completed its evolution, humankind and the universe as we know it will cease to exist and will return to its original form, that is, "dark and devoid of form". In this statement, Shiva describes Kāli as this dark and formless being, and it is thus believed that existence begins and ultimately ends with her. The Sanskrit word for this characteristic is *Digambari*, which means "she who is without form or attributes" or one whose omnipresence is part of space itself; hence, she not only controls time, but she is space as well.

To explain this further I quote from *Kali: The Feminine Force* by Ajit Mookerjee who cites a description of Kāli taken from the *Maha Nirvana Tantra*: "Just as all colours disappear into black, so all names and forms disappear in her…" (Mookerjee 1988, p. 62). Once this cycle of creation and destruction is complete, only Kāli remains, as "Unmanifest Nature in a state of potential power"(Mookerjee 1988, p. 69). Hindus believe that it is through this 'potential power' that the universe is re-created. Thus, while Kāli may be understood to be the goddess of destruction, she is also attributed the role of the goddess of creation. This ultimately asserts her role as the goddess of time.

I now move on to the physical appearance of the goddess, as seen in the image reproduced in *figure two* in this thesis. Seema Mohanty describes Kāli as follows:

> Kali is invariably dark, naked with unbound and dishevelled hair. She stands on Shiva's chest, holds in her hands a blood-stained scythe and a human head, wears a garland of male heads around her neck and a girdle of hands around her waist. Her tongue is outstretched and smeared with blood (Mohanty 2004, p. 10).

[5] Shiva is the essence of all consciousness, and the consort or male counterpart of Kāli, according to Hindu scripture.

[6] According to Hindu mythology there are four ages. In each age the quality of inhabited life, whether by gods, demons or humans is said to have deteriorated. We are believed to be in the last phase of creation, one filled with negativity and chaos, which will ultimately lead to the destruction of all creation. Thus beginning a new phase/cycle of creation and inhabitation, one that it pure and blissful in the 1st age of creation.

One of the most interesting points raised by Mohanty is that this dark skin "defies all that a fair complexion stands for – domestication, gentleness and beauty…Kali refuses to endorse traditional concepts of beauty and auspiciousness" (Mohanty 2004, p. 11).

Mohanty is perhaps referring here to cases within a traditional Hindu society where caste and skin colour play an important role in how people are viewed and treated, in which those individuals with darker skin are regarded as inferior to those with lighter skin. While I may not agree that one naturally associates fairness of complexion as more desirable and in some ways broadly associated with beauty, class and caste. Within contemporary South African Indian societies there certainly are beliefs amongst some communities that a light complexion is more beautiful or desirable, and even that it indicates something of one's moral and intellectual qualities. If one takes this into account then Kāli's appearance certainly does defy accepted notions of beauty and auspiciousness. She is the female in defiance of traditional concepts of beauty and inverts these values, asserting her beauty and her power through her darkness and aggressiveness, and the absence of domesticity in her.

Many people associate goddess energy with beauty and prosperity. However, Kāli defies the favoured notion of the goddess. Many devotees prefer to worship goddesses like Saraswati[7] or Lakshmi[8], or Durga[9]. Most devotees who worship Kāli, worship her as a remover of severe negativity or obstacles, however, while this may be the power that she is best known for, she is also a nurturer and mother figure[10]. This aspect of her character is seldom spoken about, and is misunderstood by some Hindus.

Kāli's black skin associates her with all things dark. She, like Shiva, is said to be impartial in matters of devotion, good or evil, so that Kāli blesses all who worship her. She is believed to roam the cremation grounds and is worshipped most often on new moon or 'black' nights. Kāli is the creator in the form of mother – as the goddess of time - and devourer in the cremation grounds, where she destroys the flesh of the dead. As stated by Philip Rawson in his book *The Art of Tantra*, the "graveyard is the gateway to spiritual success [in Tantric worship], to regeneration and bliss" (Rawson 1978, p. 113). Here Kāli is seen as mother, lover and the fanged bloody goddess. Once again the idea of duality is important, within Hindu and Tantric worship there is a belief that there needs to be a balance of energies for the universe to exist in harmony.

[7] The goddess of knowledge, speech, music, art and dance. She is associated with all things creative, is said to wear white and holds objects of learning and creativity in her hands. She is the spouse of Brahma, the creator.
[8] The goddess of wealth and prosperity. She sits upon a fully blossomed lotus, wears red and has coins pouring out of her hands, and shows the gesture of giving and protection. She is the spouse of Vishnu, the preserver.
[9] The goddess of protection, she rides a lion and holds weapons in her many hands. Durga, unlike Kāli, is clothed in a red sari and bejewelled, thus making her beautiful and protective at the same time. She is said to manifest from the body of Parvati, who is the spouse of Shiva, the destroyer.
[10] Here I refer to the way many devotees associate her with the mother principle. The two priests interviewed refer to her as the Divine Mother, who is nurturing and loving.

The physical attributes of Kāli mentioned by Mohanty in the quotation on page three can be interpreted in various ways; I will use numerous sources to interpret this symbolism.

In addition to the blackness of Kāli's skin, it is also noteworthy that her body is naked and her skin exposed. On a symbolic level her nakedness represents *Prakṛiti* or Nature in its truest form. Nature, as it is seen in many cultures, is often metaphorised, or actually believed to be, feminine. Hence the name "mother nature" is sometimes used with reference to natural phenomena that are considered to be untouched by the norms of cultural conduct. According to Mookerjee, Nature represents the stripping away of illusion and the ego (Mookerjee 2001). Hindus believe that human beings need only overcome the ego to attain a blissful state of being. It is the ego that holds them back, as human qualities get the better of them in most situations. Kāli's nakedness represents the aspect of nature that has no trace of human culture or modification; it is simply raw and wild. As I see it, she is the embodiment of unaltered beauty and existence that is free from ego and convention.

Apart from the skirt of human arms worn around her waist, Kāli is completely naked. From certain Indian and Western societal perspectives, this nakedness, particularly the baring of her breasts, is somewhat defiant, as it goes against what is accepted as modest or decent behaviour. To show one's body in public is still unsettling for most people, and is often tinged with shame or embarrassment. In most modern societies, which are strongly influenced by Western culture, nakedness is seen as uncivilised and degrading to women. Kāli challenges many accepted notions of behaviour and this sense of 'normal' by simply being naked.

Kāli's embracing of this natural yet unruly side of nature represents the female who is fearless in challenging those who disapprove of such behaviour. The portrayal of her body speaks of aspects of the female body that are beautiful in their natural and unaltered states. It also speak of her confidence and awareness of her own body and thus her sexuality.

Sexuality is a topic that is not often spoken about openly, particularly in South African Indian societies, and especially not with reference to gods and goddesses.[11] Rawson discusses an image (fig.5) in which Kāli sits upon the "corpse-Shiva" enjoying the act of sexual union. She sits alert, "writhing and gesticulating" with a smirk on her face (Rawson 1978). The symbolic explanation for this union is that she represents the active principle of creation while the male figure embeds his penis into her vagina and continually fertilises her into action and being (Rawson 1978, p. 122). Interestingly, here Kāli sits in a position of dominance atop the inactive male figure. In this

[11] This appears more in Tantric sects.

arrangement, it appears that Kāli holds all the power. According to the *Kama Sutra* it is in this position that the female takes on the dominant role that one usually associates with the male. Here we begin to understand that Kāli, while being a destructive and motherly figure, is also a lover and sexual being. This in itself is defiant, as sexuality is not spoken about or associated with any of the other major goddesses[12].

Sarah Caldwell in her book (1999) speaks about the sexuality and the aggression of Kāli as being intertwined. Here she looks at a particular community in Kerala and discusses their perspective on the goddess. Caldwell talks about how ancient Dravidian[13] culture saw hair as a great force that was connected to the powers of sexuality, aggression and supernatural energies. While the well-known Hindu incarnation Krishna[14] indulges in erotic play, Kāli rejects the playful expression of sexuality and rather chooses to store this potent energy, which creates an extraordinary heat within her (Caldwell 1999). Here we see the idea of storing sexual energy for the purposes of spiritual growth which is common among Hindu ascetics. In such cases, the devotee focuses all his or her sexual energies on attaining a higher spiritual connection and releases base human needs. In this instance then, Kāli holds more power because she is retaining the sexual energy that surges through her body, making her seem aggressive even. This "unfulfilled desire for sex and procreation" is said to be her source of anger and she thus requires a blood sacrifice of a human male to satisfy her 'thirst'" (Caldwell 1999, p. 167).

The two accounts given above are opposing views on the sexuality of the goddess. In one instance she is in control of a sexual encounter, in which she engages and procreates with the dormant Shiva. In the other instance, she suppresses her sexual desires in order to become more powerful due to the sexual energy within her body. In both of these accounts however, one can see that she is in control of her sexual energy. She decides what will become of those energies and holds the power to her body, her potency.

The girdle of arms around her waist has several explanations. At a symbolic level it represents Kāli cutting away the bonds of *karma*[15], which frees human beings from the cycle of rebirth and,

[12] There is however much discussed about the eroticism between Radha and Krishna, Radha is believed to be the human incarnation of Lakshmi, who is the consort of Vishnu, one of the three major male deities. I will not go into this in this dissertation.

[13] The term Dravidian is commonly used by Indian and non-Indian scholars to describe a linguistic, cultural and to some extent physical complex of people tracing their origin to the ancient Tamil-speaking culture area of southern India. The usage here refers to to a "Dravidian" culture and religion that shows little Vedic ideas and practices (Caldwell 1999, footnote p. 60)

[14] Krishna is an incarnation of one of the male god Vishnu, his main appearance in this incarnation would be in the Mahabharata.

[15] Karma is the Hindu law of action, which holds that every action, good or bad, has a consequence, or will be balanced by appropriate circumstances. Hindus believe that only once you have worked through all Karma are

ultimately, from this *maya* (illusion) (Mohanty 2004). From a practical perspective some say that artists in their depictions of the goddess added the girdle of arms later, perhaps to cover her nakedness, which was too discomforting (Mohanty 2004). Perhaps this is true; in many modern-day Hindu temples, deities are almost always covered with some type of cloth or garment. However this is an interesting point raised by Mohanty as it introduces the question of whether depictions of the goddess have altered drastically over time. What is important to note, however, is that this dressing of the deity within temples could also be a sign of attentiveness by devotees and priests rather than that of covering up nudity.

Perhaps traditional Hindus would have seen Kāli's nakedness within the temple as blasphemous, particularly given the confrontational nature of her appearance. Although, from my research, it seems more plausible that the nakedness was originally accepted and the addition of the girdle was a later manifestation (Mohanty 2004). This is not to diminish the importance of the skirt of arms, since in the next chapter, in which I speak about the dance between Shiva and Kāli, the skirt (arms or otherwise – as seen in the next chapter) is a very important factor in the tale.

While the girdle of arms may function as a garment, its purpose certainly is not to ensure modesty or uphold convention. Firstly, these dismembered arms add to the ferociousness of the goddess, and in this sense resist conventional femininity. Secondly, even with the skirt of arms, Kāli's upper body is completely bare, which suggests that the skirt is not meant to ensure modesty. The latter is considered extremely unorthodox within South African Indian societies and presumably many other Indian communities as well. The skirt adds to the eroticism and defiance of the goddess.

Apart from pearled necklaces, the most prominent decorative element on the Goddess's upper body is the garland of human skulls/heads. Hindu Metaphysicians believe that these heads symbolise the human ego that must be sacrificed to Kāli to attain *moksha*[16] (liberation). Kāli is seen as the saviour who carries her devotees around her neck (Mohanty 2004). According to Tantric traditions, this garland of heads represents the fifty alphabetic characters of the Sanskrit language and "Kāli decapitates words so that the seeker of truth is liberated from the limitations imposed by language" (Mohanty 2004, p. 13). One can draw comparison between this belief system and the symbolic understanding, as both conceptions of the Goddess suggest that the necklace of heads represents freedom and salvation. This is much like the girdle of arms that frees one from the bondage of *karma*.

---

you freed from the cycle of rebirth to ultimately attain liberation. For human beings, working off past Karma may take many lifetimes, thus the Hindu belief in reincarnation.

[16] Moksha is the same concept as the Buddhist belief of nirvana, where the soul is liberated and is believed to reach a state of union with the universal divine energy.

There is also a Telugu (a south Indian language) folk tradition which explains that the "heads around Kali's neck belong to a demon who had received a boon that no sooner did any of his heads touch the ground then the world would burst into flames" (Mohanty 2004, p. 12). Thus Kāli wears the heads around her neck to protect the world/earth from destruction. Here we see the ferocious goddess as the mother and protector of her earthly children. These heads are said to be monstrous and ferocious in appearance. However, some texts refer to them as human skulls. This, to my understanding, would explain her inhabitation of the cremation grounds, and her role as the keeper and protector of the dead.

Many texts refer to Kāli's hair as *maya* (illusion), which links back to the notion of Kāli being the source of life and death, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Symbolically, her dark expanse of wild hair is said to represent this illusive world in which human beings are completely absorbed. Hindus believe that we exist in this illusion simply to learn certain lessons which will then help us attain *moksha* (salvation) or *nirvana* (this is the Buddhists equivalent of *moksha*).

Kali's hair is unbound and dishevelled, which opposes traditional Hindu expectations of the way women should present themselves. Mohanty describes the generally accepted ways in which Indian women should wear their hair, identifying three types of hair style and dress, each of which is associated with a convention of feminine identity. These traditions are quite old and have been forsaken in many modern homes both in an Indian and South African Indian context; however, there are still societies in which women are expected to abide by this code of decorum.

Essentially, according to Mohanty, hair becomes a metaphor for sexuality, and defines a woman's life stage in relation to her having or not having a husband. The three types of woman that Mohanty speaks about are, the unmarried virgin who wears her hair in a plait or braid; the married woman, who oils, parts and knots her hair; and the widow, whose hair is shaven off (Mohanty 2004, p. 11). The metaphor translates as follows: "poised for fulfilment in the virgin, domesticated and controlled in the married woman, and stripped away in the widow." (Mohanty 2004, p. 12). I have investigated these metaphors in my own artistic practice, as I am interested in how the metaphor of hair raises questions of expectation and subservience, and also of physical beauty and accepted notions of sexuality. I regard this as an extremely orthodox view of female sexuality, one which is controlling and demeaning towards women. While this may not be the practice or understanding in most modern South African Hindu homes, it is still upheld as a cultural ideal.

Kāli's unbound and dishevelled hair comes to represent her wild and unbridled sexuality, and the fact that she embraces her desires, both sexual and predatory. She is not held 'in place' by society and does whatever she pleases. This is something many Indian women are often too afraid to do, as it would be going against accepted notions of behaviour. In other narratives the *Devi* (another name for

'the feminine'), unbinds her hair in a moment of anger, or when she is called into battle, or is upset by something (Mohanty 2004). The unbound hair in Hindu mythology is often associated with extreme anger; this is seen in the Mahabharata when Draupadi unbinds her hair[17].

I now look at the last and most prominent physical feature of Kāli. Her outstretched, blood-stained tongue is the quintessential feature that distinguishes her from all other goddesses, both those who are ferocious or destructive, and those who are not. According to Hindu mythology the most common explanation for her tongue's appearance is that while Kāli battles with the demon Rakta-Bhija, she sticks out her tongue to drink his blood. The demon was granted a boon that if even a single drop of his blood touches the earth, a clone of him would be born. Thus, Kāli spreads her tongue on the battle field and laps his blood while she (or Durga) kills him, preventing him from multiplying and destroying the world (Mohanty 2004, p. 48). I would suggest that the tongue also then becomes a symbol of aggression, for when Kāli is called to battle her tongue becomes a key 'weapon' in the destruction of this demon.

Kāli is said to have sprung forth from the forehead of Durga. The following tale relates the 'birth' of Kāli, as taken from Thomas Ashley-Farrand's *Shakti Mantras:*

> The Great goddess Durga was invoked to do battle with the demon Raktabija and his armies. Durga came to war accompanied by her band of feminine warriors called the Matrikas, or the Mothers. When the battle commenced, the Matrikas destroyed the armies of Raktabija, while Durga concentrated on Raktabija himself. But whenever Durga struck the demon and spilled blood, just like the hydra in Greek myth of Hercules, a new Raktabija emerged from each drop of spilled blood. Soon there were hundreds of Raktabijas and they were multiplying by the second. With muttered supplication, Durga transformed herself into Kali, who immediately drank the blood of every Raktabija, letting not one drop escape her. (Ashley-Farrand 2003, p.131).

I would like to extend this symbolism to suggest that the tongue, too, becomes a symbol of defiance and outrage. The simple act of sticking one's tongue out can mean various things; it can be playful, sexual or even disrespectful. The tongue is often used as a weapon of verbal abuse against women. However, it is also the tongue that becomes symbolic of a female act of resistance and 'disobedience', as women start to use the tongue to speak against oppression and patriarchy. Very rarely would one find images of Kāli without a protruding tongue, however, when depicted as such, she is most often shown to have two fearsome fangs.

[17] See the Tantric Mahabharata. Draupadi's hair is untied; this marks the collapse of civilisation. She vows to only bind her hair after she has washed it in the blood of the Kauravas who have publically shamed her and her five husbands.

The tongue however has many sexual connotations too. It is a means of verbal as well as sexual communication. In chapter two I will discuss in detail how the tongue becomes a phallic-like object in the theatre dance called *Muttiyetu*, which is dedicated to, and practiced as, the invocation of the goddess Kāli in Kerala. My own studio practice focuses on the tongue as a symbol of power and defiance in association with Kāli. These works carry with them underlying sexual references. I will speak about this in detail in Chapter Four.

In traditional depictions of the goddess, she is shown to hold in her four hands, a severed head, a sword, a lotus flower and pair of scissors. There are many Hindu goddesses who hold weapons of destruction in their many hands, but the most well-known of these are Kāli and Durga. The weapons they hold are typically "the sword of knowledge, which cuts through ignorance; [and] scissors, which cut attachment…" (Tiwari 2002, p. 51). These are ultimately used by the Devi in battle. The severed head represents the "annihilation of the ego-bound evil force…" (Mookerjee 2001, p. 62) while the lotus flower is the symbol of creation in India, and according to Buddhist symbolism also refers to the yoni (Mookerjee 2001).

Kāli and Durga should be understood to be one being with two forms. Although many understand Hinduism to be a polytheistic religion it is in fact monotheistic, in that the various depictions of gods and goddesses are in fact different manifestations of a single being or energy. Therefore, all the different forms of the female are essentially forms of the same being. To explain this point further I will briefly discuss the *Dasā Mahavidyās* or the Ten Great Wisdoms or the Hindu Tantric goddess-transformations, not to be confused with the different forms of Kāli, which will not be discussed in this paper. These are ten different manifestations of goddess energy, each of which represents a specific aspect of her character. These in turn represent different phases of existence. The symbolic understanding of the ten manifestations is extracted from both Ajit Mookerjee and Philip Rawson as follows:

The first *Dasā Mahavidya* is, *Lalitā or Kāli* who is black in colour. In this manifestation she is the power of time. She 'awakens' with positive existence as the creator. The second manifestation is *Tārā* who is shining dark blue; in this form she is portrayed with a swollen belly, symbolic of the power of creation as an active energy which sustains all. The third Mahāvidyā is *Sodaśī* (sixteen), who is red in colour and is the power of perfection. She represents desire as she sits on the body of Mahākāla in joyful sexual intercourse. The fourth manifestation is *Bhuvanesvari.* As golden as the rising sun, and with swollen breasts full of milk, she is the supporter of all existence. Next she transforms into *Chinnamastā,* the headless figure whose blood sprays from her neck. In her one hand she holds her own head, which drinks the blood that springs from her neck. On either side there is a naked, sixteen

year old figure that also drinks the blood that spills from the central seated figure. As *Chinnamastā,* she is shown as the distributor of life-energy into the universe. This manifestation is one of the most important ones as it represents the end of the goddess in her creative process. In her sixth manifestation she is called *Bhairavi;* her red body rubbed with gore represents the active power of destruction. The seventh Mahāvidya, who is smoky white in colour, and is said to be the widow, is called *Dhumāvati.* She is ferocious, angry and quarrelsome; she represents the power of darkness, the stage at which individuals forget their true origin. "This is the bottom, the nadir of creation."(Rawson 1978, p. 130).

In the next three transformations she begins to return to her true nature of ecstasy. First, *Bagala,* a yellow being who sits on a throne of jewels, represents hope and is the destroyer of negative forces. Next is *Mātāngi,* who seems to be in a drunken state of bliss, she represents the "intoxication of mantra, Tantra and longing for unity with Siva" (Rawson 1978, p. 130). As the tenth *Mahāvidyā,* she is *Kamalā,* the one who is golden in colour and is the representation of pure consciousness and the "state of reconstituted unity."[18] (Rawson 1978, p. 130)

As stated above, these Mahāvidyās are all essentially different aspects of Kāli in her different functions. People may choose to worship whichever form they desire. One must understand that from a Hindu point of view, all the manifestations of God are seen as aspects of one being, male or female. Kāli, is essentially just an aspect of the female, who is energy while Shiva represents the masculine, who is consciousness, in Hinduism.

From the above descriptions we can also see Kāli as the creator and the mother, thus explaining that she does not only represent destruction. She is also depicted as having desire and engages in sexual union with her male counterpart, Shiva. This again speaks of creation, but it also shows the female as in control of her own sexual desires. The union of Shiva and Kāli ultimately represents the universe in a state of balance, where both female and male energies are equal, and one cannot exist without the other.

Creation and destruction are essential for the universe to operate in constant harmony. Therefore, Shiva, while not being evil in nature, is the male aspect of the celestial being that Hindus associate with death and decay. And his s*hakti*, or the life force that empowers him in this process, is Parvati. While she may have an appearance much to the contrary of Shiva's, with his ash-smeared skin, a tiger pelt as a waist covering, long matted locks, and adorns himself with snakes, Parvati, being an aspect

[18] Information about Mahāvidyas taken from Rawson and Mookerjee.

of the collective *shakti,* has the ability to manifest in different forms to suit her desire. As the destructive feminine she appears as Durga and Kāli.

Unlike every other Hindu goddess, Kāli does not aspire to the accepted notions of beauty and decorum befitting a woman. Hindu society has an expectation of women to be submissive, gentle and subservient to their husbands. Though these expectations have no religious basis, they are societal and cultural idealisations of the female.

I am aware that these conventions do not hold true for all Hindu homes, and much has changed within contemporary society. There is, however, a lingering, often prominent, male dominance within South African Hindu societies. This I believe has much to do with the segregation of communities under apartheid law. This segregation forced communities to focus on traditions that were brought to South Africa by Indian migrants in the 1950's and earlier. The impulse to hold onto these traditions has kept this particular society closeted for many years. I speak of course from a position of being a second generation South African born Indian woman, who encounters the behaviours that this paper hopes to confront. "Kali thus represents the 'other' face of Nature, one that is wild and untamed, one that is associated with death and decay, one that mankind tries very hard to deny, repress and suppress." (Mohanty 2004, p. 24).

The oppressiveness of patriarchy in Hindu culture is reflected in the lives of many Hindu women. One of the most outspoken of these women is Phoolen Devi. In her autobiography, *I, Phoolen Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen*, Devi writes, "I had enough of the rule that made women silent victims who had to accept the will of men." (Devi 1997 p. 170). Born in rural India in a low caste family, she had to withstand many beatings and rapes from a very young age simply because she was very outspoken and defiant towards her parents as well as wealthier males of the community and family. This was, and still is, considered unacceptable behaviour for a woman. "Being a girl meant being even lower, a girl didn't exist without her father, her brother, her uncle or her husband or any man at all belonging to the family or cast," Devi writes (Devi 1997, p. 36). Being the daughter of a very timid man, she was kidnapped and raped for fighting for her freedom from society and the rule of patriarchy. After being a bandit for years, and killing many upper cast men for the cruelties they put lower cast women through, she joined the Samajwadi Party and became an activist for women's rights. Sadly this outspoken woman was assassinated on 25 July 2001.

Women in many societies face similar challenges and oppressions and are often treated as male possessions. As a South African Indian woman with Hindu ancestry and adherence to Hindu custom, I want to speak to this experience of womanhood, and propose that, in spite of the perceptions of women being subservient and passive, there is a place within traditional Hindu culture for the

expression of female defiance. This is offered in the form of the goddess Kāli. Not only is this defiance manifest in her appearance but also through her action. Unlike the other goddesses, Kāli is brazen but still maintains her dignity, in her own way. She defies everything that is expected of women's behaviour and appearance. Kāli is free from any attachment to another being, while she may be referred to in some texts as the spouse of Shiva, in this form she is most often understood to be a solitary figure. However, many images and sculptures show the goddess engaged in the act of sex with her partner, Shiva. Even during this act, Kāli seems to be the 'dominant' figure, as she sits or stands upon the sleeping figure of Shiva.

Addendum A refers to two interviews I conducted in Lenasia regarding Kāli worship in South Africa. Within a South African context there are different views about the worship of Kāli. The two separate interviews are with the priest of the Sri Devi Karumariamman Temple, Lenasia South, and another with the owner of the Kali Amman Sangam (not a priest), Lenasia South, who is a staunch devotee of the goddess. In both cases I received opposing views as to what the goddess represents, and the importance and relevance of her worship. I also tried to touch on the aspect of the sexuality of the goddess, which was actively disregarded by my interlocutors.

As stated at the beginning of this dissertation, the aim of this research is to find a space for this great goddess to be fiercely powerful, nurturing and defiant within contemporary society. In finding this I would have delved deeper into finding an alternative identity for the female within a contemporary South African Indian community. My position is that the South African Indian community seems to be slowly breaking out of the shell of isolated and conventional behaviour, and as a result, many young South African Indian women are speaking out against oppressions and expectations within their own communities and finding alternative identities while still trying to hold onto relevant traditions.

Chapter 2

The Dance of Kāli

This chapter focuses on the significance of traditional Indian dance in visual representations of Kāli, and how certain dance gestures and postures are seen to portray Kāli as defiant or aggressive. This relates directly to my own studio practice, in which dance imagery is an important medium of representation. The two British-Indian artists, Sutapa Biswas and Chila Kumari Burman, whose work will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, similarly use dance gestures and postures in their portrayal of the defiant female. These images relate either directly or obliquely to Kāli. Another important aspect of the dance of Kāli is that the visual depictions discussed in this chapter present a primary reference to ancient artistic representations of the goddess through sculpture.

I will analyse aspects of these gestures and postures with reference to two traditional Indian dance sculptures which portray Kāli as a dancer. There is a strong traditional connection between Kāli and Shiva through dance. Shiva is known as Nataraja (the lord of dance). As we know from the previous chapter, he is also the husband to Kāli in her passive form of Parvati. Before I begin my comparison and analysis of these two sculptures I would like to relate an iconic mythological tale in which Shiva and Kāli 'battle' through dance. The tale, cited in *Traditions of Indian Classical Dance* by Mohan Kokar, reads as follows:

> Thousands of years ago Shiva is said to have danced his most significant dance, Ananda Tandava in Tillai, just south of Madras. Shiva's many devotees were awestruck by his performance and prostrated before him. One in particular, called Patanjali, pleaded to be allowed to see the performance again. Shiva responded by asking him to wait until he made his second visit to Tillai. Thousands of years later, Shiva returns to Tillai, to give benediction to Patanjali and another devotee of Shiva, Vyaghrapada, and to grant boons to numerous other devotees. At the time, there were many temples consecrated to Shiva and his counterpart, Kali [sic]. Much to Shiva's surprise, as he was about to enter the Ancient town, he was denied admission by Kali. He found himself in a peculiar predicament. He did not want to leave without accomplishing his purpose but at the same time did not want to offend Kali. To settle the dispute he proposed to Kali that she should compete with him at dancing; the one who lost the contest would be compelled to leave the shrine and the town. With worshippers and gods as witnesses, Shiva danced many dances, while Kali succeeded in matching him perfectly. As the contest progressed, Shiva felt more and more frustrated, but out of that frustration each time was born an urge and desperation to strive further. At length, however, Shiva was convinced that he would not easily be able to subdue Kali. He then determined to humiliate her in a different way. To do this he suddenly raised his right foot to the level of his crown

> and continued to dance in that pose. Kali could well have countered, maybe even outvied, this piece of dexterous management, but her innate feminine modesty prompted her to call it a day. Quietly she withdrew from the contest and sportingly left the town and took up residence somewhere on the outskirts. (Kokar 1979, p.17)

One must understand that the classical tradition of Indian dance views Shiva as the ultimate dancer in his form known as Nataraja, as mentioned above. It is believed by worshippers of Shiva that when he dances his cosmic dance, he is actually dancing the universe into being. So this act of dance on the part of both Shiva and Kāli is extremely significant, because on a metaphysical level it comes to represent an act of creation.

Some may argue that this act of Kali's is one of submission. I disagree. Kali, as I see her, is not a being who would be pressured by societal expectation or male dominance. Had Kāli been someone to relinquish to such pressure, she would not have dared to obstruct Shiva's entrance into the town. It is believed that Shiva, who is always accompanied by goblins and ghosts, is notorious for his thunderous temper. According to Hindu mythology neither gods nor demons would willingly provoke Shiva in any way. However, Kāli is not swayed by this and candidly speaks her mind when she encounters Shiva, proves to be as agile and flexible as Shiva and quite easily matches his dexterous movements. I'd like to emphasise here that from a historical and traditional dance perspective, Nataraja is revered as the master with none as his equal. So that Kāli is able to match every movement is not only defiant in her approach to the challenge but it also gives her a power that no other god or goddess possess within the very traditions of dance.

I am suggesting that her withdrawal from the contest is done freely and for her benefit, as she leaves with her dignity still intact. Had Kāli continued to dance she would surely have given Shiva power over her by allowing him to put her in a compromising position. Kāli humbly steps away and leaves with honour and respect before her body is put on extreme display. Perhaps there is a deeper meaning to this, as within the essence of Hinduism there is the understanding that the Shiva/Shakti being resides within all forms of life, as discussed in the introduction of this thesis. Perhaps Kāli's withdrawal from the contest is done on the metaphysical understanding that Shiva is simply her masculine aspect, and she thus does not need to push her feminine aspect to that extreme.

There are many acts of defiance in this tale. Firstly she does not allow Shiva to enter the city. Secondly she accepts his challenge, when other gods or goddesses would meekly bow out of his path. And lastly, she walks away and chooses to define her own boundaries of propriety rather thanbeing demeaned by putting her femininity on public display.

The style of Shiva's dance is known as *tandava*, which is the masculine aspect of classical Indian dance. This style dominated by the sentiment[19] of *veera* or valour, and is often danced at the victory of his battle against a demon. His consort, Parvati (Kāli in her passive form) is credited with the introduction of the feminine aspect of dance known as *lasya*, which most often exhibits the sentiment of *shringara* or love (Menon 1967). Thus, for Kāli to contend with Shiva in dance means she would have had to accomplish many intricate and vigorous movements that are unique to Shiva's *tandava,* his masculinity , which she does effortlessly. Kāli's defiance, in this respect, lies in her ability both to take up the challenge and to withdraw from it. I would suggest that the *lasya* aspect of dance is seen as the counterbalance to the vigorous *tandava* movement, and as with all aspects of Hindu belief, this exemplifies a balance of opposing forces.

If we look at traditional Hindu society in South Africa, even in contemporary secular contexts, there are very few women who would dare challenge their husbands (or other male members of their community) in a verbal argument or any sort of physical battle, especially in public. As noted in the previous chapter, in relation to Phoolen Devi, some Hindu societies regard women as "lower than animals" if they are without a husband, father, brother or uncle (Cuny & Rambali 1997). In this context women would not dare question the 'authority' of these male members, and often accept the notion that men should be respected and obeyed. However this concept of power and dominance over women is very unlike the traditional Hindu conception of women, as written in the Atharva Veda[20]: "Woman is honoured as the queen of the house. The reins of the household management are held by her. The status of the woman in the house is one of respect and dignity" (Pandit N. Vedālankār, p. 152).

I now move on to an analysis of two sculptures of Kāli in her defiant dance mode, both of which materialise and embody her as a powerful presence. Figure 6 is a sixteenth century black stone sculpture from the state of Gujarat, which depicts Kāli dancing the cosmic dance. She stands in a halo of flames, and holds in her two hands a pot and a fan. A small female figure crouches below the standing figure of Kāli; she too holds a pot in her left hand, which is raised to the air. Kāli's left foot rests upon the left foot of the crouched figure. Both figures look upwards with titled heads, as if at something in the distance. Kāli's dress is minimal as expected; she wears only a filigreed looped skirt around her waist and a garland of heads or skulls, and, once again, is adorned with pearls which drape over her beautiful, powerful breasts. Her neck, ankles and wrists are clasped with jewels and her crown is decorated with skulls or heads. Her hair, unlike in other representations of the goddess, is braided into two plaits on either side of her head. She bears a slight smirk on her face. The figure below is completely naked and wears only jewels around her neck, wrists, waist and ankles. She too

[19] In classical Indian dance there are nine sentiments used in story telling through mime.
[20] One of the four main Hindu scriptures

bears a smile. The halo of flames within which Kāli dances is lined on the inside with a row of skulls or faces, looking outward.

Unlike many popular images of the goddess, in this one Kāli bears no threatening weapons, and thus does not seem to be engaged in any sort of battle. While her appearance is quiet, it is certainly not meek. She presents herself with pride and is engaged in the act of sensuous performance. In her right hand she holds a fan, which is traditionally seen as a signifier of femininity and seductiveness. However, fans are in many other cultures used not only to entertain and entice, but as a weapon of seduction too. In her left hand she holds a vessel. In many popular images of the goddess in which she is depicted with four arms, she is shown holding a severed head in her upper left hand, from which blood drips into the vessel held below it in another hand. By association the vessel as container also alludes to her female sexuality, as a container for procreation. The vessel could also be interepreted as her making an offering to a space beyond her physical presence, the same space to which she gazes.

The crouching female figure mimics Kāli's movement in holding the vessel. The positions of her arms and astride legs almost precisely mimic those of the Kāli figure. Ajit Mookerji in his book *Kali: The Feminine Force* suggests that this figure represents the feminine grandeur of the universe. She sits between Kāli's legs suggesting a reference to birth and sexuality, thus portraying Kāli as Creator or Mother of the universe. This image is reinforced by the resting of her foot upon the child figure in a protective manner, suggesting motherly contact and delicate control. However it could also be argued that the child figure comes to represent her own innocence, and is perhaps a younger version of Kāli. It is as if this piece shows a double incarnation of Kāli, both as a child, with an unrealised sexuality, and at a later stage, once she has grown into a bolder, adult figure with fully formed breasts and a sensuous presence. The aura of fire within which she dances alludes to her a presence of divinity and radiance, a state in which she is not demure but rather appears as an explosion of beauty, opulence and mesmerising power.

The looped filigree skirt, which could be made of either textile or jewels, is interesting because it relates to the tale discussed at the beginning of this chapter, in which it was shown that Kāli is never completely naked while dancing. The filigreed skirt suggests an extremely feminine quality that one does not automatically associate with Kāli. This portrayal of her seems to be contradictory to the defiant aspect of the goddess, thus associating her with sensuousness as well as alluding to nurturing, motherly mannerisms. However, the significance of the filigree lies in its ambiguity, as it simultaneously both conceals and reveals. It is blatantly suggestive while at the same time being extremely feminine in its delicateness and exquisiteness.

In contrast to this motherly, nurturing aspect, the gruesome garland of human heads or skulls is a quintessential feature of the goddess, and is always shown adorning Kāli in addition to or instead of her outstretched tongue. In this sculpture, the potentially bulky garland is made delicate by her implied scale, and no protruding tongue is evident. The small skulls in the sculpted garland appear less gruesome in their rendition than they would normally appear in paintings of the goddess. The lack of ghoulishness in the skulls enhances the sensuality of the figure, which is further amplified by the way pearls loop and curve between her voluptuous breasts. This accentuated female form is powerfully present in these motherly, yet erotic and fecund, breasts. The nakedness of the crouched figure also gives it a childlike and somewhat innocent quality, thus enhancing the idea of birth and childhood.

In general, this sculpture is less threatening and aggressive than other representations of the goddess. All her characteristics together with her implied movement, or stance, create a rather delicate and graceful feel to both the depiction of the dance and the sculpture itself. The filigreed skirt too suggests a delicate female sexuality as opposed to the more obviously violent and intimidating quality of a girdle of arms, as seen in most popular images of the goddess. The slight tilt of her shoulder and arch of her hip creates a sense of fluidity, which makes this movement seem less forceful.

This sculpture of Kāli asserts a certain kind of creativity that is uniquely 'feminine', in that it focuses on the *lasya* aspect of dance. Therefore, while she may not appear to be aggressive she does assert a particular type of power that could not be matched by a male protagonist; the power of female fecundity through birth and motherly nurturing. Part of her defiance is that she also does not appear as subservient, her strength radiates through her sheer femininity.

The next image of Kāli in dance (Figure 7) is a sixteenth century Nepalese copper figure, called Kurukullā. Unlike the previous sculpture, here Kāli is a solitary figure and stands without a halo. Once again she is semi-naked, but wears a girdle of human arms as a waist covering. Once more her chest is bare. Around her neck she wears many necklaces and a garland of human heads. Her crown too, is adorned with skulls or heads. Her gaze and stance are frontal and she too bears a mirthful smirk. In this portrayal Kāli is shown with a third eye in the centre of her forehead[21]. She stands on her left foot while the right leg is bent with the knee pointing outward and the foot resting inward.

In this sculpture she is portrayed with four arms. Indian dance *hastas,* or gestures, are very specific and dancers are able to use this along with facial expression to relate tales. Thus even through

[21] Shiva is the only other major deity with three eyes. This is said to represent time past, present and future. But it is also used as a weapon by him, it is said that when he opens this eye anything in its sight will burn to ashes. It is not unlikely that Kāli's third eye would have the same power.

sculpture a gesture could be read as a type of sign language. The *hastas* are derived from the ancient *Natya Shastra*, an ancient Indian treatise on art, music, dance and theatre. Each *hasta* has its own meaning but each *hasta* can also mean various things. Thus one *hasta* can be used to talk about different things. The gestures of her two upper arms are held in a position of holding a bow and arrow. Her lower right hand shows a gesture used for twirling either a noose or a lotus flower. The lower left hand holds what could be an elaborately decorated handle of either a vessel or her quiver in which her extra arrows would be kept, which can be seen just above her left shoulder.

The Kurukullā figure is more easily recognised as Kāli, as her ornaments and dress (the girdle of arms and her gestures that are suggestive of armour) are those that are usually associated with her. As in the previous image, here too her hip is arched, which offers an extremely seductive quality and suggests feminine movement. Her stance is a typical movement in classical Indian dance, particularly Bharata Natyam. This is the style I have studied and is sometimes present in my visual art production. That she holds weapons in her hands tells us that she may be engaged in a battle of some sort or is preparing for an approach to the battle field. The foot movement adds to the idea of her shooting an arrow, with her body leaning to the right side as if she were pulling back with force just before releasing her arrow. This type of movement is often used in dance drama when showing a battle scene and could perhaps be followed by a leap in order to show the follow through of an archers shot. If the goddess really is engaged in battle, as she appears to be, then it would seem logical that the lower right hand is actually twirling a noose as opposed to a lotus flower, thus enhancing the combative side of the goddess. The elaborate object held in her left hand does appear to be threatening simply because of its sharp decorative handle, although it could be a vessel or a quiver. Either would be typical objects associated with her, especially while engaged in battle. The vessel as explained above is used to catch the blood of the demon as the goddess beheads him. The smirk on her face could be one of mockery of, or triumph over, her opponent.

Her body is elaborately decorated with continuous lines of jewels and a chunky garland of male heads. These jewels, which create rhythmic semi circles over her body, accentuate her breasts, her belly and even her pelvic area, thus emphasising her feminine sexuality and power as a dancer. These lines become almost circuit like, as the energy and power of her movement traverses through her being. While the goddess is engaged in this dramatic dance of battle, I, as the viewer, am mesmerised by the rapture of this movement over her seductive body. While her decorative clothing of jewels move elegantly and fluidly around her body and head, her eyes are poised completely still, as if in a moment of fixed focus. The vertical orientation of the open third eye is a reminder of her spiritual state, her divine power and her absolute intent.

Unlike the previous sculpture this one appears to have more of a sense of masculine or *tandava* style of movement. The body is in a flux of movement that includes leg lifts and possible leaps, and this adds to the idea of Kāli being engaged in battle or defiant dance. Her garland and skirt of arms seem to sway along with the movement of her body, which, if we refer back to the tale related at the beginning of this chapter, would be vigorous and swift, much like it appears to be in this sculpture. This sculpture patently is not about the nurturing and motherly side of the goddess. Although bearing a smile, she seems to be more aggressive, seductive and forceful. She is a woman engaged and enraged in battle. This sense of power is much more dominating than in the piece previously discussed, and it perhaps provokes a more immediate response from the viewer, which seems to 'awaken' and enliven both the sculpture and the goddess.

These Kāli sculptures carry with them an authority and power; they inspire both defiance in a moral and philosophical sense. Although they may seem less dominant in a masculine sense, their grace and beauty is not without majesty and triumph. Masculinity should not necessarily imply strength and authority, but often it is assumed, particularly in Indian homes, that masculinity or manliness signifies the right to control and rule over the females within the household. Kāli's power lies within her womanly movement; her *lasya*[22] is able to captivate, entice, distract, and then attack. She is also able to dominate a space through her delicate movement and poise.

Both sculptures embrace strong sexual associations of the goddess by placing an emphasis on her sensuous female form. These emphases speak of Hindu society's perception of Kāli's sexuality. From many Hindu tantric perspectives and perhaps others, Kāli is seen as an extremely sexual goddess; her sexuality is often discussed, particularly within Tantric sects. In these sects the performance of ritual acts of sex, along with other 'taboo' activities, are part of Kāli worship (S. Mohanty 2004). Within some Hindu societies, female sexuality is something that is extremely controlled and sometimes even considered to be non-existent, except in cases of pregnancy and birth. According to Sarah Caldwell's findings in her book *Oh Terrifying Mother*, women are very aware that this restriction is not normal but "any open acknowledgement of female feelings or frustrations are generally taboo, and a tense silence on such topics is nearly always maintained." (Caldwell 1999, p. 200). Men, quite to the contrary, have no limitations set upon them, and are allowed to explore their sexuality to whatever extent they wish.

As Caldwell states, men in Kerala begin sexual relations while still in high school, and some of these encounters are homosexual in nature. While in a South African context Hindu women may have more

[22] This aspect of classical Indian dance is understood to be sensual, seductive and gentler, and is said to be feminine. It is most often associated with the goddess, while the masculine aspect known as Tandava is associated with Shiva.

freedom with regard to sexuality, it is still a topic that is barely acknowledged or spoken about between generations. In India this idea of sexual control is particularly dominant in rural areas and societies in which the caste system still prevails. Male supremacy works against all women in these areas but low caste women in particular are truly taken advantage of (Caldwell 1999). Prior to the 1940's the law of Kerala prohibited lower-caste women from wearing an upper body covering. While lower-caste women were allowed to move around more freely than upper-caste women, this worked to their detriment, because when the lady of the house sent them to the market they often "had to submit to the sexual advances by upper-caste males" (Caldwell 1999, p. 197).

To focus more specifically on the sexuality of Kāli, I would like to discuss *Mutiyettu* (pictured in Figure 8) the theatrical folk dance practice of Kerala, in south-west India. In many ways this dance is an invocation of the goddess and there are many discussions around sexuality within the region of Kerala. An interesting point raised by Caldwell is that only men are allowed to perform this dance theatre, even though it is focused on a female goddess (Caldwell, 1999). Women are seen as impure[23] and therefore cannot perform. For this reason I will look at some aspects of culture and sexual practice within this region which may illuminate my analysis.

Kerala is a state in which women's sexuality is a taboo subject, both to the men who dominate and amongst women themselves. However, what is interesting is that Kāli is portrayed in this dance as an extremely sexually alert being. While she is portrayed as a woman, with fully formed breasts and in touch with her female sexuality, she also stands for what women "should not be" in this society, as stated by Caldwell (1999, p. 200). "The enactment of the bloodthirsty and lustful Bhadrakāli[24] reinforces images of females as aggressors in the very contexts where they have the least control" (Caldwell 1999, p. 200). In other words, Kāli represents exactly what women are preferred not to be according to this male-dominated society. If a woman shows any sign of negative emotion, that is, if she screams in anger or cries, then she is referred to as "a real Bhadrakāli", which has a negative connotation in this society where *Muttiyettu* is performed (Caldwell 1999, p. 204).

Kāli is not allowed to be an ally to these women and is made so fearful that even men show fear of this sexually advanced and aggressive goddess. This creates a gap between the female human and the goddess, as most then choose to worship the more passive deities like Krishna and Parvati. While they may not worship the goddess they are in some way still devoted to her but this devotion is done out of fear rather than love or desire. A woman interviewed by Caldwell stated, "see, if we do anything wrong, if we commit any mistake, we fear she will punish us. It is for that reason we have devotion

[23] Perhaps this is due to their monthly menstrual cycle, most Hindu societies classify this as impure and women are expected to keep away from objects of divinity and devotion during their period.
[24] One of the many names for the Goddess.

for her. [Actually] it's not devotion, it's a kind of fear" (Caldwell 1999, p. 203). Women in Kerala thus do not associate with the goddess, as to them she becomes more like the dominant male, who also happens to be portrayed in theatre by the dominant males of the community.

Interestingly, in this context, Kāli is repositioned as a negative entity, who is worshipped as a powerful being who holds control over everything. Her pent-up sexual energy is said to be stored to the point of inducing aggression in her, and it is this that is feared by both men and women. The performance of *Mutiyettu* is seen as an appeasement of the goddess. This polarity of the negative and positive representations of Kāli is interesting as it positions the goddess as a powerful being who is both protector and malicious destroyer. While I may not agree with this almost demonic version of the goddess, I do think it is important to acknowledge this portrayal as it emphasises the sexual power and defiance held within her spirit and being. This sexual power seems to take control over these men during their performances and is feared by the women who view the performance from outside the temple.

Even during the performance, while she may be portrayed as the lustful, bloodthirsty, aggressive female, I would suggest she also comes to expose that which is feared by men. It is by their portrayal of the goddess in this way that men in this society have succeeded in keeping their wives and woman relatives at home, behind closed doors, in an extremely controlled and contained environment. Without going into too much detail about male sexuality in Kerala, it must be acknowledged that the vagina is, to a certain extent, feared as a destructive organ. Therefore for many men, the preferred form of sex is fellatio, as opposed to vaginal sex. They see the vagina as something that 'sucks' the 'vital male energy', semen, from the male body.

Semen is believed to contain 'special powers' (Caldwell 1999). This belief is held to such an extent that homosexual fellatio is silently the preferred method of sex amongst men in this region, according to Caldwell's research. The reason for this, as brought up in an interview conducted by Caldwell, is that there is the perception that in male homosexual encounters, semen stays between male energies. This 'vital male energy' is therefore not threatened. Ironically, it seems clear that vaginal sex at its most brutal, in the form of rape, is far more destructive to the female body, let alone her emotional state, which as Caldwell has already noted is completely denied within this society. Perhaps the male preference for fellatio has more to do with his desire to control and dominate, sexually and otherwise, than it has to do with his 'fear' of the vagina.

This, however, raises interesting issues when the male dancer who portrays Kāli wears as part of his costume a head with a protruding tongue around his waist. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kāli's tongue protrudes so that she could lap up all the blood of the demon Raktabija, as this is the

only way the demon can finally be destroyed. In the tale given by the performers of *Mutiyettu*, this demon is called Dārika, and Kāli calls upon another being called Vetālam, who is said to be the blood drinker. In the dance the portrayal of Vetālam is the hanging tongue/face around the Kāli character's waist. According to Seema Mohanty, the form of Kāli known as Bhagavati does not have a protruding tongue (Mohanty, 2004). This would explain the addition of the Vetālam character; it is this character that acts as the tongue of Kāli, who laps up the blood of the demon.

The tongue that protrudes from the waist of the Kāli character, who is actually a man, thus has strong phallic connotations. However, as Caldwell argues, "Vetālam's carnivorous, veracious tongue seems to be equivalent to an exaggerated clitoris, a sign of the goddess's excessive, aggressive sexuality" (Caldwell 1999, p. 178-179). The tongue is therefore a hybrid organ that while phallic is also able to 'drink' the blood of the demon, just as the vagina is believed to absorb the male's vital energy during heterosexual vaginal sex (Caldwell 1999).

There are several other interesting gender dynamics that emerge in this performance. For example, women themselves are left out of this performance and all the rituals associated with it, thus keeping them at a distance from the goddess. Here the female power of Kāli is deliberately kept away from the women within the community, and they seem to have no choice in the matter. It is ironic that this performance is done to glorify, demonstrate and appease the power of this female energy, and yet it is only performed by male dancers. In the next chapter we will see the two contemporary artists who claim this power and use the Kāli principle to demonstrate women who challenge patriarchal systems. The sexuality of the goddess seems to be central to the performances. It is her female sexual energy that gives her the power to be destructive and aggressive. As much as the male performers may take control of this performance I would like to suggest that ultimately it is Kāli who has the power here. When the central performer goes into a trance like state when he is being filled with Kāli energy - female energy- and he has no control over this. The goddess takes control of his body, and it is as if she awakens into human form.

This male-directed attempt to control access to Kāli is also a characteristic found in South African Hindu societies. My interviews with the two Kāli priests, discussed previously, affirm this tendency. Either she is viewed negatively with fear, and all the rituals are performed by men, or there is a complete avoidance of her potentially disruptive sexuality. I speak only of the two male priests whose positions I have accessed in relation to this research, and I acknowledge that there may be many female devotees who may perform Kāli rituals within their own homes. While most young South African Indian women of my generation now have the opportunity to be educated and earn a living, there is still an underlying expectation of them to fulfil certain roles within the society. Those who do not are often met with confrontation, and even a patronising pity, for their lifestyle choices. A woman

often has to fight for respect, and if she is outspoken she is repeatedly met with much difficulty, much like the famed Phoolen Devi of the 20th century. That said, though, I cannot deny that there are also many Hindu men within these communities who are affectionate and treat the females in their lives with tenderness and respect. I think what is important to note is that in many cases these women choose to be outspoken, their willingness to challenge the expectations and demands of an overarching patriarchal system demonstrates the Kāli principle within them.

Chapter 3

The Representation of Kāli in the work of Sutapa Biswas and Chila Kumari Burman

This chapter looks at the work of two London-based female artists, Sutapa Biswas and Chila Kumari Burman, both of whom have Indian ancestry. I will analyse only one work by each artist. In the case of Biswas, the work directly refers to the goddess Kāli, whereas Kumari Burman's work alludes to Kāli indirectly. The work does however place the female, particularly the Indian female, within a context that positions her as powerful and perhaps aggressive. I begin with a brief discussion of each work before I move on to a more in-depth discussion of these within a feminist framework.

Sutapa Biswas studied at Leeds University in the early 1980's. Being an Indian migrant in Britain allowed Biswas to view the university system very differently to other female artists and colleagues. Griselda Pollock, who taught Biswas, notes in her text *Tracing Figures of Presence: Naming Ciphers of Absence Feminism, Imperialism and Postmodernity: The Work of Sutapa Biswas,* that for Biswas this identity was not just about being a woman, but rather about being a woman of colour within imperialist Britain. Her work at the time focused on issues of colonialism and feminism (Pollock 2004).

In her work *Housewives with Steak- Knives* (1985) (Figure 9), Biswas uses a recognisable representation of Kāli and places her within a contemporary setting. A dark overpowering figure stands almost centrally within the image. She confronts the viewer with her gaze. Her body is cut off by the edge of the picture just below the waist, so one does not actually see her full stance. She holds in her four arms a sword, a severed head of a white male, a lotus flower and lastly shows the gesture of protection.[25] Biswas has added an image to the hand that holds the lotus. The image, a "photocopy of another image of an active woman punishing male evil and threat" is a reproduction of *Judith and Holofernes* (fig 10) (c. 1620) by Artemisia Gentileschi (Pollock 2004, p. 25). Biswas's figure's arms and hands are extremely muscular, one could say almost manly at first glance. Her necklace of 'skulls' is actually made up of faces of well-known, white male "political miscreants" (Pollock 2004, p. 25).

Unlike common images of the goddess, this figure is clothed; she wears a red sleeveless printed vest and there is a suggestion by the black strip around her waist that she wears a skirt. Emphasis is placed on the arms and hands through the way Biswas has worked the surface. This draws attention to the materiality of the image.

[25] This gesture of the hand raised, palm facing the viewer is commonly used in Hindu iconography as a gesture of protection and blessing.

Biswas alludes to race in the placement of this image on white paper. Pollock, in her text, states that "the piece knowingly sets white against black by imaging the Hindu goddess Kāli, which means black, on white paper." (Pollock 2004, p. 24).

The reference to race is more than just the surface against background as the figure itself is rendered in a dark brown. From studied iconography of the physical characteristics of the goddess, one expects the skin to be either black or dark blue. By making the skin dark brown, Biswas has intentionally brought attention to a non-Caucasian identity, that is, either Indian or even African. From the title we gather that this is obviously a woman in a domestic setting, and with that statement one already understands that certain expectations have been laid upon her. That is to say that she should be passive, modest and obedient, she's a woman and her place is in the kitchen. However, this idea of the "passive feminine" is disrupted by the creation of a "murderous heroine" (Pollock 2004, p.25), not only in Biswas's image but also in Gentileschi's. The thought of the "housewife with steaknives" does seem to have an ominous undertone, one that perhaps places the housewife in a position of physical threat or dominance.

This notion of the "murderous heroine" (Pollock 2004, p.25), intrigues me. Gentileschi's image is a well-known image and according to Pollock, functions as a sign for Western feminist art history. It does however in some sense remind me of the Kalighat[26] school of painting in India. Not in style, but rather the content functions along similar ideas. That is to say that in some Kalighat paintings one would find images of female dominance, such as wives beating husbands or husbands bowing to their wives. While the artists of this school of painting worked according to many themes, most often they were informed by daily life. Living in such close proximity to the Kāli temple possibly inspired them to work with these themes. Often these renderings take on a somewhat humorous or farcical tone. Often in these paintings a man is portrayed as submissive, and the assertiveness of women is prominent (Mookerjee 1988). However, one must remember that often this use of satire enabled the artists to invert the actual societal structure. Therefore even though some societies within India were matrilineal at some stage, one should not assume that these men were actually being beaten by their wives, or that women held any dominance within the home or community.

Perhaps Biswas's Housewives *with Steak-Knives* does play on the idea of satire, but it also immediately confronts the viewer with the idea of the "murderous heroine". The scale of the work

[26] These paintings were made by Bengali folk-artists. During the early 19th century they lived around the Kāli temple of Kalighat. Within this school of painting artists preoccupied themselves with many themes, such as, drunkenness, domestic quarrels, religious hypocrisy and feminine power. The use of satire along with very basic lined brushstrokes and a limited range of colours make up this somewhat humorous array of works.

itself dominates the viewer's space. The figure commands most of the ground within the image. Not only are the arms very muscular but, on closer inspection, they seem somewhat disproportionate to the rest of the figure; they appear to be much bigger than they should be for the size of the woman's torso. My feeling is that this was done intentionally, as the sense of aggression, dynamism and power that emanates from the figure is heightened by this distortion of the arms and hands.

The lower right hand of the figure, which holds the lotus and the photocopied image, seems to clutch them very tightly, almost as though it were strangling something. A clenched fist could perhaps suggest anger or frustration. It is a known icon for defiance in many cultural and political movements. What stands out for me at first glance is the upper right hand. This hand holds the gesture of *abhayam* or protection. What strikes me is that most often when one sees this gesture in images of Hindu deities, it is often held either at the chest or just above. Biswas's placement of this hand much higher which immediately implies a sense of dominance and one could view it as a hand that is hitting or striking as opposed to protecting.

The title of the work suggests that the "steak knives" or sword is important. But the entire sword is not even visible within the frame of the work. I assume that Biswas is drawing attention to the idea of Kāli as a dominant female, with or without her weapons and emphasises her characteristic confrontational gaze that sets her apart from other Hindu goddesses.

The necklace of male heads worn by the figure is curious and strident. From the Kāli iconography dealt with in chapter one and two, we know that the necklace of skulls has shifting significance. Symbolically these skulls or heads were seen to represent the ego (Mohanty 2004). This adornment around Kāli's neck is seen to represent the soul's liberation, and thus its detachment from worldly ties. In Biswas's image however, the heads are recognisably those of politicians (Pollock 2004). I doubt that her intention was for them to be the 'liberated souls' traditionally symbolised by the skulls. They are more like the trophy heads of patriarchal colonial signifiers. By placing them around the neck of this figure that represents the fearsome Hindu goddess, Biswas transposes these colonial figures into a new context.

I would like to suggest that perhaps this is an attempt not merely at poking fun at these politicians and what they stand for. Rather, by placing them within an Asian context, Biswas in some senses forces them to 'confront' the people they colonised and subsequently ignore, treat as outsiders, or continue to deny in contemporary society. Biswas was at the time interested in issues of otherness and questioned the idea that migrants were always expected to make 'exotic' art. As Pollock, her teacher, states "It was she [Biswas] who named the imperialism that still structured the course analyses, and which

spoke in undifferentiated terms of class and gender, never acknowledging the issues of race and colonialism." (Pollock 2004, p. 24).

This 'Kāli' could also be interpreted as holding these men around her neck as a means of controlling them and their ideals. As we know from the previous chapter, the necklace of heads around the neck of Kāli, according to a Telegu tradition, could be symbolic of the heads of evil. According to the tale, they are the heads of a demon who was granted a boon that when one of his many heads touched the ground, the earth would burst into flames. Kāli controls this demon and stops his destruction by placing every fallen head around her neck. Thus one could read this in Biswas's image as well. These politicians represent a certain kind of evil or a certain belief system that Biswas is questioning or opposing, and in that questioning she is placing them in a vulnerable position. Her 'Kāli' thus has a form of conceptual power over these dominant male forces.

The vest that covers the figure's torso is made up of a print that, according to Pollock, looks like both mouths and eyes (Pollock 2004). This brings us back to the idea of the gaze. Here, Kāli is the one who gazes. Together with the scale of the image these 'eyes' on her vest and the eyes of the figure become overwhelming for the viewer, and one starts to question one's own sense of importance in front of this image. This confrontational gaze makes one feel less important and places one in an almost submissive position to the female figure. What is also interesting about the gaze here is its inversion of the Western historical convention of image-viewing, in which images created for the male gaze allow the leisurely surveying female body. Here there is no room for gazing at the body, for even when one looks at what covers the body, one is still being confronted by the 'eye-like' patterning looking back at you. These patterns could also reference the mouth or evocatively allude to female genitalia or sexuality. This again places the Kāli figure in a position of power and confrontation, rather than a position of meekness or passivity.

Before discussing this image in relation to defiance and its place within a specific feminist framework, I want to move on to the work of Chila Kumari Burman.

Chila Kumari Burman, unlike Sutapa Biswas, was born in Liverpool after her parents emigrated from India to Britain in the 1950's. She studied art at Leeds Polytechnic, and she too found herself in a situation where 'black women' were expected to make a certain kind of art. Once again we see the belief that Indian female artists were expected to make art that was "exotic" and portrayed their ancestry, rather than question or comment on their personal contexts as migrant Indians within an imperialist society. She was at the time interested in issues of black women under apartheid in South Africa and Asian women in Britain (Nead, 1995).

Kumari Burman generates images of herself in her own constructed context. She is particularly interested in the idea or notion of the "heroine" in popular and traditional cultures. Themes that one picks up in her work are, as Sonali Fernando puts it, "a deliberately promiscuous gathering of heretics, wild feminine energies and working class heroines from popular culture"(Fernando 1995, p. 7). These "feminine energies" to which Fernando refers often recur in Kumari Burman's work. They are most commonly the Rani of Jhansi, the goddess Kāli and even the untouchable bandit queen Phoolen Devi (Fernando 1995).

The work that I will discuss in this dissertation, *Shotokan* (1993) (figure 11), does not directly reference the goddess, or any of the women mentioned above, for that matter. The work comprises four black and white portraits of a woman performing the Japanese martial art Shotokan. The dimensions of these photographic panels are about 121.9 x 66 cm each. The portraits are of Kumari Burman, dressed in a sari performing in front of a mural that functions as a backdrop. This mural was painted by her in collaboration with youth groups and her brother who works as a graffiti artist (Nead 1995). In each image she 'attacks' the camera with different martial art moves. Her hair is mostly untied and sways wildly as the movement is captured. The expression of the figure is always angry, aggressive and confrontational. There is a definite sense of dramatic movement within the frame as the image blurs at certain points, defining the action.

The work addresses issues of identity, both mythical identity and constructed. The fact that she is quite clearly an Asian woman dressed in traditional clothing allows one to make certain readings without even knowing the context of the photographs. Whether these were taken in Britain or India, they certainly create an alternative image of the behaviour and character of Indian women. She quite easily moves in her sari, which is conventionally a dress of 'modesty' and 'piety'. In this she challenges these conventions by making the sari an active, even aggressive garment. One knows that the artist has purposely chosen this type of clothing to speak from and of a specific race, and perhaps even class, group.

This image is, however, constructed or set in a very specific context as the back wall has a mural painted on it, created through a collaborative project between Kumari Burman and her brother. The viewer does not have full view of the mural and in two of the images we see the same background. This background consists of two figures, one that looks like a female jogging and the other of a black male looking directly at the viewer, in a completely passive manner. This background is just a fragment of the mural though, which in totality is 40x45 feet and is entitled *One Love* (1991). The entire image of the mural is set in a landscape with the world map boldly overlaid with the words "one love". On the left is what appears to be a contemporary metropolis and on the right, a 'traditional' Indian architectural building, which very closely resembles a mosque. At face value, this image

obviously alludes to race, gender and politics, with overall altruistic themes of peace and love for difference.

In *Shotokan,* Kumari Burman's aggressive images of herself are ironically staged in front of this message of peace constructing herself as if wild and confrontational. As Lynda Nead states "the image of this fighting woman, frozen in mid-kick, forces the viewer to acknowledge the assertive new identities being claimed by Asian women in the 1990s." (Nead 1995, p. 15). The woman of the 1990s that Kumari Burman is displaying here is one that is unafraid to challenge and confront expectation, whether this expectation is within the Indian community itself or one set within the broader context of being a migrant in imperialist Britain. As Nead puts it, the viewer is "visually 'attacked' by the legs, arms and angry face of the figure" (Nead 1995).

From a certain perspective this attacking and confrontation can be seen to resemble Indian dance movement. Even the way the sari is tied is similar to the saris used by classical Indian dancers during rehearsals. However, in Burman's images the modesty of the garment changes with the movements of the figure. It brings to mind the tale in which Kāli engages in dance battle with Shiva, but then silently withdraws when the situation calls for her lifting her leg, which would ultimately lift her skirt and show her body to the public (see Chapter Two). The movement in Kumari Burman's images, perhaps unintentionally, alludes to this tale. This is what intrigues me about them. These images become particularly relevant to my own production as they look quite similar to a photographic series (called "Kali Tandava") that is part of my body of work.

Lastly I want to talk about the hair of Kumari Burman's figure. This must clearly be inspired by the typical image of Kāli. The hair is wild and dishevelled, and sways as she moves, much like the swaying as Kāli dances. This representation of hair also touches on the issues of sexuality and illusion. Within orthodox Hindu communities wild, untied hair is often frowned upon. As discussed in chapter one, loose hair becomes a metaphor for sexuality, a symbol of sexual control or lack thereof. I will elaborate on this in chapter four. Kāli's hair, on a symbolic level, is said to represent *maya* or illusion. Perhaps Kumari Burman is subtly drawing attention to all these issues. This loose, wild hair starts to represent a certain type of aggression and defiance and I would go as far as to say that Burman is the living presence of a modern day Kāli within these photographs.

While both artists are of Indian descent and studied and work within a Western art and academic system, their practices coincide with a black feminist framework that would have been relevant during the time of the production of these artworks. It is worth noting as well, that Burman's images were made eight years after Biswas's and yet they were challenging the same system of intolerance within Britain.

The feminist frameworks and theories discussed in this dissertation are mainly from the 1980's and 1990's, and this selective reading is done intentionally as these artworks were made at that time. These works were addressing their particular traditional and colonial contexts, and it is therefore relevant to speak to and about discourses during that period. I am aware that the same belief systems within the British context and within Feminist theory have evolved and changed. For me, the purpose of this chapter is to look back at how feminism has contextualised these two artists in particular, while bearing in mind that more contemporary ideas of feminism inform both their and my production now.

Biswas, in an interview with Yasmin Kureishi (1986), states that her use of Hindu mythology is to get her Western audience to make a concerted effort to read more about her culture and background. She feels that not enough research is done into this culture and it is therefore misunderstood and generalised in a particular way. This generalisation leads to an expectation of this society, and in Biswas's case, an expectation of the kind of art she is supposed to make (Biswas, 1986). She reworks traditional myths and legends to question and provoke western attitudes and assumptions of Indian and Hindu society. Some may argue that by doing this she is already falling into the trap of creating works that could be seen as 'exotic'. I would disagree. Biswas and Kumari Burman both use these myths in dynamic and interesting ways. By referencing images and myths of feminine power that stem from an Indian or Hindu background, they not only force viewers to engage more with the intricacies of their heritage, as opposed to the exoticised versions of it, but they also use these traditions of power to speak against the very system that has restricted it.

In her article *There have always been Great Blackwomen Artists* (1987), Burman explains that black women artists have always struggled not only to establish themselves within the art world, but to establish their existence within the world itself (Burman, 1986). This loss, or absence, of their identity is felt more because they, as black women, feel that they fought for women's rights alongside white women, and yet white women are afforded the benefits of their joint victory over male dominance. Similarly, black women fought alongside black men against racial prejudice, but have not benefited from social changes with regard to racial equality in the same way that black men have. Burman feels that it is the oppression exercised by white, male-dominated societies that has caused this to happen (Burman 1987). The idea amongst black women then is to establish a new challenge to oppression, one that is outside of "black liberation" and "white-dominated feminist movements" (Burman 1987, p. 195).

In both Biswas's and Burman's cases there is evidence of this kind of oppression, one in which black women artists seem to struggle to survive and to assert themselves. In this case, both artists speak from the position of being migrant Indian women. In her introduction to *Visibly Female* (1987),

Hilary Robinson writes that the one common approach feminist artists have is the "recognition of the oppression of women", regardless of race and class (Robinson 1987, p.1). However, while their art may be informed by feminist politics, it is not necessarily always the same politics. Each artist acts on her own politics of oppression, which is informed by changing circumstances.

In the case of Biswas and Burman, the politics at hand was the issue of being the only Indian or 'black' female artist in the university class, leading to a certain "tokenism" in the way in which they were regarded by their instructors and peers (Robinson 1987). This idea of tokenism did not only apply to women of colour, but to all female artists and art lecturers. It affected women within university and colleges as well as galleries. During the time of Greenberg's modernism we see male artists rising above all and defining what abstract expressionism quintessentially was, while the female artists who worked in a very similar mode were lucky to be noticed, to receive a mention in any review or critique or to be considered seriously[27]. This was the case for the American abstract painters Helen Frankenthaler and Lee Krasner. This notion of tokenism refers to woman artists at the time, but it was felt more intensely by black female artists of the time as a double negative.

For Biswas in particular, tokenism is applied in that she was considered the Indian student who was supposed to make a certain type of art and speak from a certain point of view, an expectation that came particularly from the male lecturers (Pollock 2004). Burman felt that white feminist artist worked from a particular point of view and did not engage enough to learn about the black women's oppression. This she calls the "Eurocentric" theory and practice of women's art (Burman 1986), in which, according to Burman, there is a clear absence of black women's voices. This would explain Burman's constant use of Indian heroines within her work, even the created heroines, such as in Shotokan.

Burman conducted a survey when she was still studying and found that black female students felt hostility and indifference from their institutions, almost as though they were just there as tokens to fill a quota (Burman 1986). Even the works of these women were looked at as though they did not belong within the walls of those institutions (Burman 1986). Instead of making art that was expected of their race groups, these women were making politically oppositional work, and this aggravated the teaching staff of that time, according to Burman. These women, and this includes Biswas, were expected to make some type of "ethnic" art, and those who chose not to were seriously questioned and misunderstood (Burman 1986).

[27] Here the notion of tokenism extends to white female artists, while male artists were recognised for their work through Greenberg's writings, female artists were marginalised and only a select few were fortunate enough to get a small review or acknowledgement.

Robinson talks about there being no one "single" type of feminist art, or approach to feminist art. She also recognises that feminist art does not use a specific mode of production (Robinson 1987). In *Visibly Female* she quotes Lisa Tickner as saying, "feminism is a politics, not a methodology" (Robinson 1987, p.1-2). Thus it is easy to conclude that both Biswas and Burman were simply feminist artists who addressed their own politics, namely those of their traditional histories, the colleges within which they studied to be artists, and the colonial context within which they were producing art. Importantly it was through their individual practices that they addressed issues in each of these spheres.

Griselda Pollock, in her essay *Painting, Feminism, History* (1992) talks about a "false universalism" amongst feminist artists (Pollock 1992, p. 3), in which white feminist artists would speak as if on behalf of all women, when in fact they did not understand or even familiarise themselves with the politics of women of colour. Pollock notes that Denise Riley states that this false universalism essentially only speaks about the positions and oppressions of middle-class, white, western women, as though this view were embraced by all of womankind (Pollock 1992). Pollock also notes a point made by Gilan Tawadros that there should be a broader understanding of feminism in which it is recognised that we all speak from a particular place, a particular history and out of a particular culture and experience, "without being contained by this position" (Pollock 1992,p. 20). I think that Tawadros's observation of the importance of not being contained is very important. Not only does it allow for feminist artists to work across cultural and racial boundaries, but it also allows for them to use 'tools' from other cultural backgrounds to speak of their own histories and oppressions and also to challenge the very culture they may be "borrowing" from, this is particularly evident in the work of Lubaina Himid, which Tawadros discusses in detail, but about which I will not go into further detail in this dissertation[28].

An aspect that becomes very important in both Biswas's and Burman's works is the idea of presence, though in very different ways in each case. Pollock talks about the "presence" of the white female body within art (Pollock 1992). In a way, this reiterates what Burman has said about the "loss" or absence of the black female identity. In this essay, Pollock speaks of the white female body as the objectified and prised material of fantasy and art, while the black female body is brutalised and violated through slavery and racism (Pollock 1992). Pollock also notes that for black women this outrage against their absence within hegemonic cultures "dictate[s] the necessity for a creative production of presence" (Pollock 1992, p. 3).

[28] For more on Himid's work see Gilane Tawadros *Beyond the Boundary: the work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain*

Both Biswas and Burman work with this idea of presence, and in doing so, they either create new identities for Indian women and the way Indian women are viewed by the British population, and they also 're-create' identities. Both artists create aggressive images that reference and question both their Indian origins and their colonial cultural contexts.

The idea of presence in the work of Biswas, particularly in *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, emerges on many levels. While Biswas certainly is addressing issues of race, class and gender within this work and is using myth in a somewhat humorous way to speak about this very serious topic, she also unknowingly addresses her own personal history and memory; this she becomes aware of only a few years later, as stated in Moira Roth text, *Reading between the lines: the imprinted spaces of Sutapa Biswas* (1991).

In *Housewives with Steak-Knives* the idea of presence on a formal level is quite clearly laid out, as the figure confronts the viewer with her gaze. Her presence is also asserted through the use of materiality, size and space. Added to this is the conscious allusion to the aggressive Hindu goddess. The inclusion of Gentileschi's reproduction, as small as it may be, enunciates the point of female aggression even further. It serves as a tool of recognition in western art, particularly for those who may have misunderstood the Kāli iconography. As stated above, both images within Biswas's work speak of female aggression. The presence of this figure and the figure's aggression and assertion of power cannot be ignored or denied.

I think that this is something that actually happens on an unconscious level for Biswas. While Biswas has consciously created an embodiment of the "presence" of Kāli within the "present" time through this drawing, she has also unconsciously played with the idea of time and the movement of a strong female figure through time, not only through the use of Gentileschi's image, but also on an intuitive level. As discussed in chapter one, while Kāli may appear to be simply a goddess of destruction and defiance, she is in fact the goddess of time. Here, Biswas presents her as the present, the woman of now, she has knowingly moved her into a contemporary setting. She has thus also played with the idea of what Kāli actually represents, and that is time.

There is yet another level to Biswas's "unconsciousness" in the details of the image of her Kāli. The vest of this figure, with its mouth-like and eye-like designs, is actually something that Biswas herself had carried with her in memory. Years after the work was made, Biswas made a visit back to India, where she had found some of her Grandmothers belongings, including an image of the Goddess Kāli in which she was wearing a vest with the same pattern as that which Biswas had drawn years before her trip (Roth 1991). Biswas's memory of the vest, carried from infancy, I would like to suggest, is actually evidence of her working on an intuitive level of presence. According to this mode of

working, the power of the goddess has enabled her not only to find a way of reworking myths and icons to speak of and against the system she is opposing, but it has also given her the tools, the pattern, without her knowledge, to challenge these systems. This adds another dimension to Biswas's work, and this is something that she begins to explore in the projects that follow this work.

Burman's functioning of presence works on a very different level to that of Biswas. In *Shotokan,* as in many of her works, Burman has used the tool of creating her own contexts and personalities (Fernando 1995). She does this by taking "symbolic role models" (Fernando 1995) such as Kāli or Phoolen Devi and turns them into images of the self. In this way, she becomes the image of Kāli as Kāli becomes the image of her. She is creating new identities for women, particularly Indian women at the time. I do not think that these identities are created to challenge expectations within her own culture; rather, they are there to challenge notions that imperialist Britain may have had about Indian women at the time.

Burman uses the actual physical presence of the female figure, her own body, within these photographs to speak of these different and new identities for the Indian woman. Burman is aware of the blatant lack of an Indian or black existence within the British art world, and she just as blatantly asserts their presence in *Shotokan.* Burman states "Our first struggle is to establish our existence let alone our credibility as autonomous beings in the art world." (Fernando 1995).

Both Biswas and Burman use the past, its imagery and mythology to speak of presence within the present. Interestingly though, Biswas uses this imagery and de-mythologizes it by placing it within an ordinary domestic setting, she literally turns the Kāli figure into a "housewife". While in Burman's works and in *Shotokan* in particular, she re-mythologizes this figure, turning her into something of a warrior Kāli-like figure of defiance and aggression. One cannot deny that in both works, the confrontational gaze is what draws you in. This is what challenges the viewer to engage with the work, on a visual or physical level as well as on an intellectual or subliminal level. The challenge is visual or physical, because in both works the viewer is physically confronted by a female of defiance and aggression, and intellectual or subliminal because both images are not accessible if you do not have knowledge of where these images come from, the myths that they allude to, and the systems that they speak to and against.

While these two artists speak from a very specific geographical and cultural context, I do believe that these issues are still relevant, particularly from and to my position as a South African Indian woman, living and working in a post-apartheid climate. The issues raised by them are still relevant to me as an artist who is using traditional Hindu iconography to question stereotypes within a South African

Indian community; a community that has struggled through oppression to protect its identity yet assimilate itself to a multicultural society.

To bring these artists' and my own production to a contemporary understanding of feminist theory I would like to refer very briefly to the 2007 exhibition, *Global Feminisms*, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin at the Brooklyn Museum. The plural use of the word "feminisms" in the title is an attempt at highlighting the fact that there are many feminist theories and positions on a global level. These positions are "varied, multiple, unstable constructions of female subjects and their predicaments and situations" (Reilly & Nochlin 2007, p. 11).

The key issue that was highlighted in this exhibition is the notion of "difference", with the consideration that issues of difference are important to understanding contemporary feminist theory and art. Women from various parts of the world were invited to exhibit on this show in such a way that no expectations or preconceptions were applied to the kind of work these artists would create. Some of the artists on show did not necessarily refer to themselves as feminists, but the position of the exhibition was to use artists who made artworks that had underlying gender issues, whether directly or obliquely.

As Reilly and Nochlin have said, "What counts as feminist in one context may be understood differently in another" (Reilly & Nochlin 2007, p.12). Even when looking back at these works of Biswas and Kumari-Burman, which were being made at a time when these new questions of feminist theory were being asked for the first time, one understands that this notion of feminist identity and theory is one that is constantly evolving. Yet it still maintains the idea that each artist's or woman's position is different and that her reaction is a challenge or comment on her own position within a given cultural, political and historical context.

Chapter .4

My Dance with Kāli

This chapter is focused discussion of the practical component of my Master's degree. My exhibition, entitled *Kali*, was displayed in 2008 at the Art Extra Gallery, Johannesburg. My discussion begins with a consideration of the materiality of my work, which is as important as Kāli iconography itself in terms of the creation of meaning in my practice. In looking at my use of Kāli imagery I will compare and contrast it to that of Biswas and Kumari Burman. The theme of women's defiance against patriarchy, as communicated through the image of Kāli, emerges as an important theme in relation to production of work discussed in this chapter.

Before I attempt to analyse my artistic production I do need to state in retrospect that through my theoretical readings, and taking into account the feminist framework that surrounds the works of both Biswas and Kumari Burman, I understand that my work exists in a context in which it could be read in relation to a black feminist perspective. While this exhibition was being made in 2008, it was not expressly my intention to position the work in this way. However, I now consider the works to have been made within a broader feminist framework. That said, my position does speak to and challenge both the broader post-apartheid South African context and the conventions of diasporic South African Indian society. I understand and engage with the potency of Kāli as a defiant female from within both a Hindu and a feminist framework, both of which are frames of self-affirmation and strategic defiant behaviour.

My two preferred mediums are painting and photography. However, when painting I have steered away from traditional mediums of oil or acrylic on canvas. Instead I use earth-based pigments and substances, such as Kumkum powder (vermilion), turmeric powder, sandalwood powder, hand-crushed coal and ash. All of these pigments are made from natural, earth-based products and are often seen to have affective powers when used during ritual acts of devotion within Hinduism. Another important aspect of my paintings is the use of thread and the act of sewing as a form of image making. I will speak of each medium in greater detail below.

Earth, in Indian culture, as many other cultures, is often associated with feminine energy. For instance, it is common to speak of "mother earth" and the powers held therein. For Hindus this energy is *shakti*, the primordial energy that is often spoken about as the feminine aspect of being. This association of women and earth can sometimes promote stereotyped views of women, women as nature, as opposed to men as culture. However, there are also different ways of looking at this association, which I explore in my practice. I also assert the specificity of this association to Indian culture. Even in present times women in many areas of India, particularly rural areas, continue to use

cow dung not just as fuel but as material to make vessels, pots and plates. This skill provides a livelihood for some families. Within Hindu culture it is believed that earth and all its living beings are activated through the power of *shakti*, the feminine force. I try to sustain this belief by the way I invest earth-based materials with significance and how the surface of the canvas, to my mind, comes to carry the idea of this 'female energy'. While this reference to feminine energy through the use of these pigments is important in my work, it is also important to note that these pigmented surfaces assert their physicality and are quite visceral. The pigments are not only effective in creating the bodily references but are also affective in the power that these references hold on a ritualistic level.

The colours, red, yellow and black are also strongly associated with the divine and human female, particularly in a ritual sense. Kumkum powder, turmeric powder and ash are often anointed upon the statue of the female deity as a form of cleansing and worship. Kumkum powder is also well known as the red pigment that marks the forehead of married Hindu women. While this 'dot' is a sign of marriage it important to note that in most parts of India a girl-child is given this marking as soon as she starts menstruating. It is therefore not just a sign of marriage but one of femininity, a mark that is unique to the women of India and of Indian descent. Her becoming a young woman in the sense of her being able to bear children is publicly acknowledged. While from a patriarchal point of view this acknowledgment may occur for many reasons, including that of announcing that the girl-child is now of marriageable age, I would like to add that this is also a public acknowledgement of her sexuality. She holds the power to bear children, to be a nurturer while at the same time has the power to entice.

According to a Hindu belief the mark on the forehead also brings awareness to the energy centre that sits at the middle of the forehead, also known as the third-eye chakra. This therefore acknowledges the s*hakti* or energy that sits latent within every human being.

It is common amongst Hindu's to associate ash with the image of Shiva. Traditional images of Shiva show that his body is covered with ash, which is either shown as a light blue or grey-white shade and is believed to come from the cremation grounds upon which he roams.
When I first began working with the image of Kāli I used ash as a coded reference to her male counter deity or energy, Shiva. However, my interest now, after much research, has evolved such that I now use ash to both reference and challenge this image of Shiva. The medium of ash sets Kāli against Shiva as an equal, and not just as his spouse.

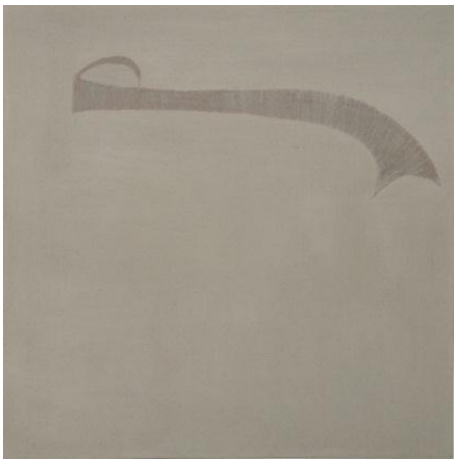


Figure 1

As noted in chapter one, the seventh of the ten great wisdoms of Kāli called *Dhumāvati,* is the ash covered widow (figure 12). Worshippers see Shiva's ferocious, ash-covered body as an image of immense power. My perception is that this widow-like image of Kāli can be read in a similar way. I would suggest that she holds as much power as he does. As *Dhumāvati,* Kāli represents the power of darkness, the stage where all beings forget their true nature. As Rawson puts it, "This is the bottom, the nadir of creation."(Rawson 1978, p. 130). I understand this to be the stage of disintegration, where there is a return to the elements, that is, ash or dust. I am not suggesting that Kāli represents 'evil' or any negativity in this stage of being; it is in this stage that we see the duality in the iconography of the goddess, where she is both nurturer and destroyer. Many Hindu worshippers associate death and this darker side of nature and being with Shiva. I am suggesting that this state may also be connected to Kāli. The use of ash in my paintings represents the state of darkness which most human beings are too afraid to confront. It is here, in these paintings, that Kāli is shown as Shiva's equal and the line between male and female no longer exists.

Turmeric powder, while it is well known for its medicinal properties is also frequently applied in the ritual worship of some Hindu deities. It is seen as the purifier, and is always anointed onto the bodies of brides and grooms a few days before they are to wed. However it is used in abundance when worshipping *shakti*, particularly in the south of India. Often the statue of a female deity is smeared with this paste after she is bathed in milk and water.

In my paintings the burnt yellow turmeric powder, unlike the ash, is vibrant and bold. While the ash is subtle and consciously speaks of decay, the turmeric powder pulsates with energy. The bright yellow surface immediately draws one's attention. Much like the power of Kāli, it is daring and yet full of healing. It seems to bring a certain kind of life and energy to the surface of the canvas. But it is also for this reason that I do not use the turmeric without first blending and tempering it with the kumkum (vermilion) powder. The brightness of the turmeric is too overpowering and is not easily associated with feminine energy if one does not read if from a Hindu perspective. And my intention is never for the works to be read from only one point of view.

The last substance that I use to stain and colour my canvases is coal. I hand crush circles of coal before wetting and applying the powder to the surface of the canvas. The blackness and depth of the

coal is a direct reference to the dark vast expanse firstly of Kāli's body and her wild matted locks, as well as to the vast blackness of the void both alluded to in Chapter One.

Over time, the idea of decay has become a more important part of the paintings than I had originally expected or intended. Unexpectedly, the red pigment starts to fade over time. While this may not have been an intentional effect on the surface of the paintings, it has become crucial to their meaning. This dissertation deals with Kāli as the goddess of time, who is herself strongly associated with decay and death. It is significance in this light that the paintings that reference her start to decay over time, without this being due to the control or deliberate action of the maker. This not only speaks significantly of the innate feminine powers within the pigments, but also the ephemeral nature of both the pigment and process of creation. When I say creation I refer to my own creativity as an artist, to that of the material world within which I exist, and to the aspect of creation and fecundity that exists innately within all female beings.

As I have discussed earlier in this dissertation, according to Hindu mythology, hair is supposed to represent the concept of *maya* or illusion. Hindus believe that we as human beings are submerged in the illusion of life, and that all that is around us is merely the soul working off karma on a physical level. Once we die, or rather awaken from this illusion, we will disappear into the vastness of the void that is Kāli. We will become one with the universal energy, by whichever name one wishes to call him or her. This energy is seen to be in all beings and all matter. And if one thinks of the universe as energy, then one would understand the Hindu belief that all this energy is interconnected. This spiritual understanding is not obviously relayed in my artwork, but it is from this intuitive understanding that I create these works. There is an intuitively spiritual and ritual-like act at the centre of the creation of these paintings. The application of the pigment to the surface becomes an act of infusing the canvas with the potential power of the goddess both materially and ritually, as well as symbolically.

In my work the inclusion of hair is not only a reference to illusion or a disappearance of the soul into this being of Kāli. It is also an embracing of the wilder side of nature, the untamed side that attempts to embrace the world without restriction or convention. Her wild locks cover the surfaces of these canvasses, some done symmetrically, others done with a looser hand. The surfaces of these black paintings are treated differently, but each speaks of the hair and body of Kāli. The dimensions of these paintings are intentionally created to match my own height. These paintings are less about the iconography of the goddess and more about the bodily and sexual quality of her being. They represent the way I imagine Kāli to be were she in this world as a physical being, as opposed to a metaphysical concept or energy. Of course it goes without saying that these paintings are influenced by popular images of the goddess.

As mentioned earlier another significant medium in my paintings is cotton thread. The making and threading of the stitch and its association is also very important. This is not because of its reference to craft or an activity that is associated with the female (although one cannot deny this significance). Rather it is the aggressiveness of the act of penetrating the surface of the canvas that is important to me. And it is also the process of stitching that is vital to the production of the work, both conceptually and visually. It is an act of labour, a cathartic process that I force myself to engage in. This act is both meditative and dance-like, as I shift around the canvas in repetitive gestures and movements from front to back, linking the seen and the unseen.

Much like the pigments, the thread also draws on a subconscious or spiritual perception during the act of creation. Within the Hindu belief system, there is an understanding that all human beings have a latent feminine energy that sits dormant at the base of the spine. Along the spine there are seven other energy centres known as the *chakras*. The coiled dormant energy at the base of the spine is known as the *Kundalini Shakti*. It is believed that this latent energy is the thread that links all the *chakras* and once awakened it is a very powerful spiritual tool for human beings. On a symbolic level, the use of thread in my paintings starts to become exaggerated around centres of potency that refer to this feminine energy.

All of the elements mentioned above come together to form my paintings, though not all necessarily at once. These paintings all draw strongly on a single image of Kāli (see fig. 4). It is from this image that I extract elements or fragments of the goddess and distil these into a new whole form. The fragments I use vary. They might be tongues and swords or masses of hair and delicate flowers. All of these images are built up relief on the surface of the canvas. My use of thread and pigment mentioned above is intended to stimulate both a visual and spiritual sensation of energy and vibrancy. The style of stitching varies between artworks, and each stitched 'image' plays differently with the surface.

The stitched elements are a synecdoche of the physical body of Kāli, but at the same time also speak to the systems that I hope to challenge through my production and embodiment of these images. When referring to the body of the goddess one cannot deny the obvious and almost forceful sexual nature of it. This is something that is expressed consciously in the paintings. The intention of this body of work is to challenge patriarchal systems within the South African Indian community, and the expectations placed upon women by these traditions. Therefore these symbols have resonance in a social context beyond the mythology surrounding Kāli.



Figure 2

The tongue, Kāli's quintessential feature, as seen in the painting *It is 'kala' that devours all but it is Kali that devours even time* (fig. 13), comes to signify a weapon of power. Indian women are expected to be submissive and in some communities are verbally or physically abused if they do not comply. The symbol of the tongue in my work comments both on the potential power of speaking out in such contexts - words can wound and are thus potential weapons - and the pain of disempowerment if speaking out is denied. Therefore the use of tongues and swords in my work is a visualisation of power that might be applicable to the reality of the situation to which traditional Hindu women in South Africa are subjected. The power of the tongue to speak out suggests an alternative form of behaviour for these women. The only way to change strong social structures that are not beneficial to all of society is to speak out against them.

The title of the work suggests that the tongue is part of the lexicon of Kāli's power, as she is the singular being amongst Hindu deities who is said to have control over time itself. It is this power to control that I am ascribing to the women of these communities. The potential power of Kāli lies within all their tongues. Another important and potent association of the tongue is the sexuality of the goddess. Much has been discussed about the sexuality of the goddess in the previous chapters. It is with these associations in mind that this synecdoche recurs in my paintings. In *It is 'kala' that devours all but it is Kali that devours even time* the red surface upon which the red tongue is stitched suggests more than just the lapping of blood from the battle field. The visceral and abject quality of the pigment alludes also to menstrual fluid, directly referring to female sexuality and procreative ability.

In this painting the tongue becomes something that is both creative and destructive. This duality is the nature of the goddess herself, and if applied in the Indian community, would be a shift that enables a level of balance and structure that might be beneficial to both the male and female within Indian society.

Similarly, this duality appears in the painting *Yoni* (fig. 14) where the deliberate accuracy and sensitivity with which the flower is sewn is contrasted against the deep vibrant brush marks on the surface. Here the title suggests a very direct allusion to female sexuality. But this flower is also held by the Kāli in Figure Two. It thus starts to reference the destructive objects held in the hands of the goddess, while at the same time referring to the delicacy of her nature.

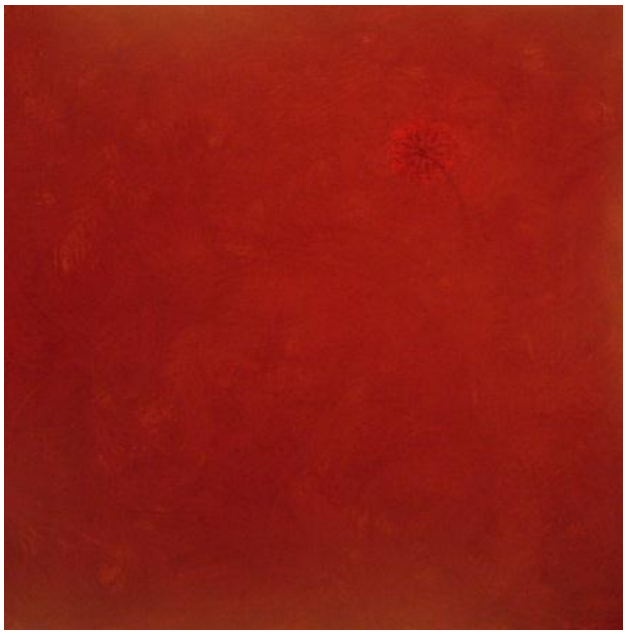


Figure 3

Kāli as the defiant female uses both her tongue and swords in battle. The sword, as spoken about in chapter one, has other symbolic meanings. It is referred to as "the sword of knowledge, which cuts through ignorance; scissors, which cut attachment…" (Tiwari 2002, p. 51). On one level my works with the stitched swords establish a point of aggression and perhaps defiance through the use of these 'weapons' and their allusions. Yet on another level they too become a synecdoche for the power of Kāli and the potential power of women in society.

What starts to happen with all the paintings as they are created and placed next to each other is that they become almost alphabetical or lexicon-like. On some level they speak about language and the idea of reading and understanding, specifically related to Kāli. This idea recurs in the various media I work with, though very differently to the way it is achieved in the stitched sword pieces. While the artworks are all steeped in a very deep understanding and relationship to Kāli and the idea of the defiant female, they also create a coded language which becomes more about interpretation and interruption and less about understanding the mythologies and iconography from which they are created.

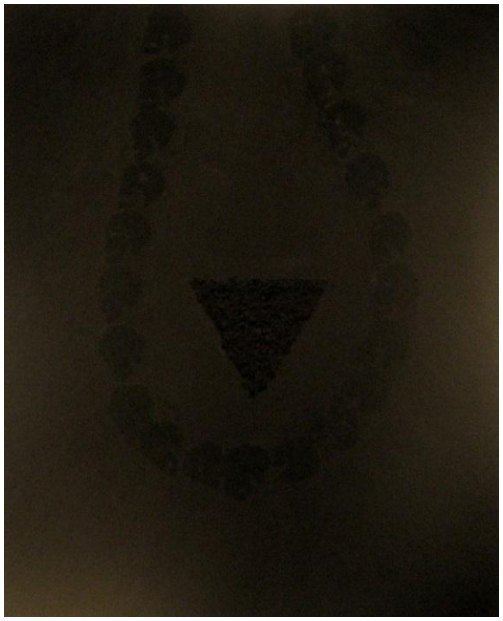


Figure 15

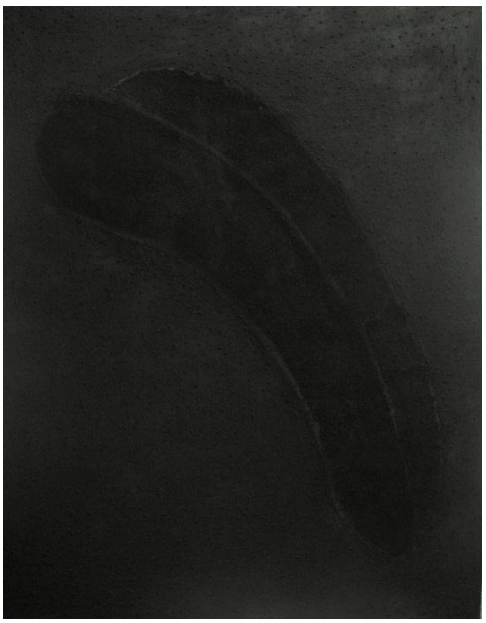


Figure 5

The 'black' body, nakedness, and wild matted locks of the goddess are directly referenced in a series of four large black paintings, two of which are shown above. These coal-stained and painted canvases use subtle shifts in tonality and texture to allude to the nude female form. At the same time the immense curly threads of wool and dots of stitched black thread overwhelm the canvas as masses of dark hair. In *Digambari (she who is clad in space)* (fig. 15) the brushstrokes start to allude to the voluptuousness of her breasts and the wild masses of swaying hair caressing her nakedness, while the only two obviously visible fragments are her *yoni* and the skulls that frame her body. The overall image is one that speaks of fecundity and sexuality. The female form is celebrated as something powerful, overwhelming, beautiful and strong, yet delicate. In *Devouress* (fig. 16), I once again refer to her outstretched tongue. This black tongue, surrounded by tiny stitched dots of thread becomes symbolic of the enormity and power of her being. The tongue, her most powerful weapon consumes almost the entire surface of the canvas. The overpowering nature of the black crushed coal upon black painted coal along with the shift created by the use of the black wool or thead embraces the powerful, enormous figure of the Kāli. Here she is challenging not only in appearance but in the absolute volume of her presence. It is with this in mind that these four paintings are placed in the exhibition, they become or evoke moments of intense beauty which overwhelms and holds the viewer in the captivating magnetism that is Kāli.

Kāli as I see her is an extremely active being, in her movements, her sexuality and her difference. Here I refer to her difference in comparison to other female deities. To reiterate what I have already mentioned in chapter one, the goddess Kāli is one who is often seen as the unconventional female being. One who is naked and wild. This represents in essence the unbridled side of nature that is

generally considered outrageous in conservative societies. For me it is this very side or aspect of nature that I try to embrace within my art, but in a very subtle way.

The idea of language is explored more directly in my photographic works and it also here that I create the dance and movement of the goddess. Over a few years the element of dance has become a key language used to build dialogues and identities in my work. I have studied *Bharatanatyam*, a South Indian classical dance style, from the age of eight and have come to a point where my dance and art are no longer separate spheres of creativity. The use of gesture, or *hasta*, posture and facial expression all aid in the storytelling mime - *abhinaya* -aspect of classical Indian dance, and are as important as the foot and torso movements. Using these learnt *hastas* and postures I have created photographic and video-based narratives. Thus photography and video have also become important media in my practice. The intricacies and laws of all classical Indian dance, music and theatre are taken from the *Nātyasāstra* which is an ancient treatise on the performing arts which was written between the period 200 BC and 200AD, and is attributed to the sage Bharata. So the *hastas* used in these works come from a codified place of history and tradition.

The video work *Untitled* (fig 17) that I refer to does not form part of this body of work, it was actually made in 2003, before my interest in Kāli iconography began. I feel it is important to mention, however, as it is from this point in my production that the language of dance was used to speak of issues that affect woman on a global level. The *Untitled* video was shown as part of my master's exhibition; this addition created a moment of movement within the exhibition itself and also provided a background to the black and white dance photographic works.



Figure 6

It comprises two female figures from different race groups, both dressed in red standing in front of red backdrops. The woman on the right is a deaf woman who uses sign language to tell a story, the woman on the left tells the same story through the use of classical Indian *abhinaya*. The silence along with the conscious repetitive loop of the story powerfully draws the viewer in, it forces an engagement with the story as one needs to pay close attention to understand what is being spoken about, especially if you do not understand sign language or *abhinaya*.



Figure 7

One of my black and white photographic artworks entitled *Kāli Tandava* (fig. 18), is made up of a series of forty five images that are placed together to create a large contact sheet. In this work the images of a dancer using mime/*abhinaya* are ordered in a way that is meant to create a narrative. Here the dancer communicates different emotions of a fictional female character. The repetition of the dancer becomes almost like an alphabet, thus drawing on the idea of the 'coded language' within my production, once again. Whether the viewer is able to read classical *abhinaya* or not, there is a deep level of interpretation that occurs when reading the images. As one views the work from a distance, one is faced with a lexicon of symbols. But when you move closer it becomes clear that these symbols are actually full images of a female classical Indian dancer in different poses, using *hastas* and *abhinaya* to communicate an unspoken language. The arrangement of this lexicon of symbols to create a new language forms a narrative, simulating a text that runs from left to right. Alternatively, each enactment could be read as individual images that become iconic moments within a narrative. This influences how the viewer interprets and understands the language of the photograph, the language of the dance and the language of the lexicon. There is of course a level at which the work can be understood abstractly. This is necessary as very few people are familiar with this gestural language. This abstract understanding also refers to the abstractness of the Kāli and the human minds inability to fully grasp the concept of her being.

The narrative that I refer to in *Kali Tandava* is a fictional story that I have created using legends and myths about the goddess Kāli along with ordinary domestic situations, both older and contemporary. In this tale the woman goes through different stages of being, she moves from the submissive, weak, insecure, loyal wife to a challenging, somewhat indifferent woman and eventually becomes a defiant, Kāli-like figure. In this last part of the narrative the female becomes more prominent in both stance and presence. Her hair is unbound, her body language becomes aggressive and her dot - in this case as a reference to marriage - is smeared or rubbed off as if in a heated moment of rage. But this smearing of the red powder on the forehead speaks on a deeper level of the *Shakti* within her; it is an outward acknowledgment of the latent power within the human female.

This kind of imaging of Hindu women, as aggressive and defiant is a shift away from the traditional aspect of this particular style of dance, as her costume too becomes less important. Generally a male dancer would take on the role of the aggressor, while the female dancer tends to be more submissive and sensual. Not only is she breaking away from stereotyped societal conventions placed upon her but she also challenges the conventions and traditions of this style of dance. The word *Tandava* in the title is taken from the aspect of Indian classical dance that is associated with Shiva, or masculine energy. Here Kāli or the female is given the opportunity to perform a masculine style of dance, which becomes prominent in the last three lines of the narrative contact sheet. However, the work is less about the dance. Rather its focus is on the aspect of the transformative female figure. Dance is simply used as the language through which her story is told. It is this very traditional art form that is used as a tool to speak about a very unconventional woman.



Figure 8

Another very important photographic work that appeared in the 2008 exhibition is the work titled *Kalika* (figure 19), measuring 95 x 112cm. It shows an image of a dancer in a direct confrontational gaze, sitting in a posture that suggests power and perhaps a vehicle upon which she rides, with many arms spread around her. The rendering of the many arms is not a post-photographic alteration. Rather, it was taken with a slow shutter while the dancer moved her arms continuously and continuously changed her *hastas*. This then created the illusion of a single figure with many arms. These alternating *hastas* are meant to represent the various weapons held by the goddess Durga as she enters the

battlefield. As mentioned in Chapter Two, it is from the brow of Durga, in a moment of rage, that Kāli springs forth to help defeat the demon Raktabija.

For me this image comes to represent the battle cry of the goddess. It is an image that blatantly portrays and signifies the power and ruthless nature of both Durga and Kāli. Here the female dancer faces her viewer, and her direct confrontational gaze is challenging. The dancer is the full embodiment of the defiant female. In this image she is the one doing the looking, and in some ways this is her way of possessing power over the stage, the performance, the dance, the female character, and the viewer.

The constant movement of the arms, contrasted with the stillness of the body, creates an almost other-worldly, fantastical space in which the dancer exists. This then adds to the concept of Kāli as an abstract being is never truly understood by humans. The almost completely washed out figure, rendered this way due to the open shutter, becomes ephemeral in some sense. Once again this relates to the ever-evolving nature of Kāli and also of the contemporary female as one who is constantly changing and challenging the stereotypes placed upon her.



Figure 20



Figure 21

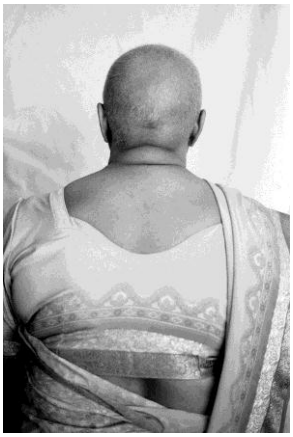


Figure 22



Figure 23

The next set of photographic images (fig 20 – 23) looks at three traditional forms of the Hindu female as described by Seema Mohanty in *The Book of Kali*. Mohanty points out the three forms that are distinguished by the arrangement and presentation of their hair. The hair is meant to be read as a metaphor for female sexuality within this particular society. The three types are the unmarried virgin who wears her hair in a braid, the married woman who oils, parts and knots her hair and the widow, whose hair is shaven off (Mohanty, 2004).

These images depict three women of different age groups photographed from the torso upwards with their backs facing the viewer. These portraits show their different hairstyles, each of which is

associated with the women's different age, marital or social status, as per Mohanty's description referenced above. In addition to these three traditional hairstyles I have introduced a fourth image which depicts the back of a naked woman with unbound matted hair. This is an obvious reference to the goddess Kāli and her association with the wild, untamed side of femininity. In agreement with Mohanty's metaphor of hair as standing in for sexuality these images read as described below.

The girl-child, pictured in *Unawakended* (fig. 20), whose hair is kept in a neat braid, speaks of a restrained and almost locked away, dormant sexuality. Here she is innocent and on some level still unaware of her sexuality. The married woman pictured in *Restrained* (fig. 21), whose hair parted and kept in a tight bun at the nape of her neck speaks of a restricted kind of sexuality that is controlled by another. Her sexuality, much like her hair and perfect attire is, in a way, in its place. Her hair is not seen in its natural state, but is rather kept tight and neat, only to be unbound for her husband. The image of the widow, entitled *Stripped* (fig. 22) is a somewhat controversial figure. Up until the 20th century the widow within Hindu society was regarded as a "bad omen". Once her husband passed on she was condemned to a life of chastity within a widow community (see the Deepa Mehta film *Water*, 2005). That is not to say that this practice does not continue within the 21st century, however, it does not occur as severely as before, and perhaps not within major cities in India. From personal experience though, I have noticed the difference between the way married women and widows are treated within South African Hindu societies. While it may not be as severe as shaving the widow's hair and rejecting her from society, there is still an underlying intolerance towards her and her children. It appears as if the widow and her children are forgotten once the male 'head' of the household has passed away.

Traditionally these women had no place to go and were not accepted into any community. They would earn money by begging outside temples and were expected to wear white clothes and have their hair shaven off. This act of shaving the hair off the female scalp represents a stripping away of beauty, femininity, sexuality and ultimately identity.

The inclusion of the Kāli image, entitled *Unbridled* (fig. 23), is my defiant addition to these three traditional feminine hairstyles. This image suggests that there is yet another option for women within this community. Kāli's wild dishevelled locks fly around her naked body. I would suggest that metaphorically her hair speaks of her untamed sexuality, which she fully embraces without confinement or control.

Kāli is the only goddess whose hair flies outrageously around her body. While other female deities are sometimes shown with long untied hair, there is always a certain amount of grace and restraint with which it flows down the face and back of the goddess. Kāli's hair, on the other hand, is endless and

abundant, much like her power and the vast darkness of her being. If one looks at the image of Kāli long enough one would be overcome by a feeling of disappearing into this infinite expanse of hair that surrounds her. With this description of her hair I am suggesting that her sexuality is just as mesmerising and boundless. I am suggesting that she embraces it in the same way that her hair embraces her body. This last back portrait of the nude Kāli-like figure with her mass of dark hair is meant to evoke a new sense of female identity within all women: a femininity that is not bound by societal or patriarchal expectation.

While three of these portraits may be a portrayal of the 'traditional' Indian female who is in step with the decorum and modesty that is expected of her, all four images are at their most basic level images of defiance. I say this because in each image the viewer is confronted with the back of the figure, as if she refuses to show her face. This act of turning the back to the viewer is an aggressive act of defiance. At the same time, however, the images hold a sense of vulnerability as well. These women are both aggressive and vulnerable, but do still instil a sense of fear in the viewer, as their representation leaves open the question of what they would look like if they turned around. This is particularly so in the case of the *Unbridled* image.

I would like to look comparatively at my portrayal of Kāli and the idea of the defiant female in relation to the works *Housewives with Steak-Knives* (1985) and *Shotokan* (1993) by Sutapa Biswas and Chila Kumari Burman, respectively.

Biswas's *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, as discussed in the previous chapter, portrays the image of Kāli quite directly and places her within a domestic setting. In this work Biswas is not only questioning the patriarchy within which she lives as a woman of Indian ancestry, but also comments on the British stereotypes of these women. Biswas's drawing, made on a crumpled paper, which suggests that the work is not treated with preciousness, is done in an almost propagandistic style. This styling of the work suggests that it is meant to be read as a poster that very directly challenges the systems to which the artist speaks.

We also recognise that the male heads that make up Kāli's necklace in *Housewives with Steak-Knives* are politicians, and we know that the political systems that she is addressing are Western. Biswas's drawing is aggressive in almost every way: the manner in which the paper is treated, the emphasis on the Kāli figure's physical strength, the threatening gaze, the hand raised as if it is about to strike, and the tight fist grasping the flower. Together these elements create a very hostile and almost violent image. In this way the work succeeds in achieving what it was meant to, she creates a defiant female of Indian decent. Given that Biswas and I have produced Kāli imagery in two very different countries

during two very different socio-political climates, there would naturally be a distinct difference in the ways in which we address issues that affect our social situations.

This distinction is most apparent in the way the artworks are created. While we both use Kāli imagery as a reference to the defiant female, there is a vast difference in the way in which this image is used and the systems that are challenged by it. In Biswas's case, this system is British patriarchy, whereas in my case the systems are both South African patriarchy and patriarchy within my direct Indian community.

With reference to my painting *It is 'kala' that devours all, but it is Kāli that devours even time* (2007) the image of the tongue stitched onto the canvas is intended as a direct reference to the outstretched tongue of Kāli. This subtle yet powerful image becomes a symbol that constantly recurs in my production. As mentioned previously, it speaks not only of the ferociousness of the goddess, but also of her sexuality, and becomes a symbol of power for speaking out for ordinary women. Unlike Biswas's drawing, my abstracted painting, if one is not familiar with Kāli iconography, functions more as an allusion to Kāli rather than a direct representation of her image. This subtlety allows for many other readings of the work. This is intentional as it pulls the work out of a space where it is read as religious iconography or is exoticised by western perspectives. This reinforces the idea that while these artworks are all made from the position of using Kāli as a point of departure; but they also essentially speak to and challenge patriarchal systems in general.

Visually my work and Biswas's are very different. One is a drawing and is an obviously confrontational image of a Kāli-like figure. The other is subtle with no bodily reference to the goddess other than the tongue. The scale of the imagery that appears in both works are also very different. Biswas's enormous figure fills almost the entire page upon which it is rendered. While the tongue in my painting is small and is subtly placed to the bottom right side of the canvas, and the surface is treated with brush marks that lends a fluidity and flow to the surface.

Materially these works are very different too. Biswas uses known traditional western art materials, such as pastel on paper, and executes the work through a representational technique of drawing. The power in Biswas's drawing is not so much the reference to the goddess but the manner in which the work is executed. Her bold mark-making and exaggeration of the form of the figure is more assertive in speaking to the systems she challenges. She is not making religious art or referencing Indian culture; rather she is using Kāli iconography within a western system of art making and using her bold mark-making to assert and challenge the very system within which she produces. Therefore she is also challenging the traditional use of her material. Biswas does not fall into the trap of creating the kind of

art that is expected of her, one that announces her being of Indian ancestry; rather she uses this iconography to challenge the idea of being an 'exotic' artist within British imperialist society.

Certain areas of the figure, like the arms and hands are built up in this drawing to emphasise these parts of the body. She has collaged certain elements into the drawing as well. The paper upon which all this is done is wrinkled, since, in Biswas's own words, "I never made my work to last - it was never precious - I thought, oh well if it gets a hole in it, it gets a hole in it" (Biswas 1987, p. 37). The tongue and face are rendered quite beautifully, though my feeling is that more attention has been paid to the hands of the figure. These bright red hands function as signals and start taking on the qualities similar to those represented in revolutionary posters. The body of the figure itself is rather unusual for Kāli iconography, as she is clothed in this image. And while one could read this as a domesticating, or restraining, of Kāli I doubt that this was Biswas's intention. The print on this vest that covers her body has eye-like or mouth-like patterns, these orifice patterns speak of sexuality, verbal power and of a constant watching by the Kāli figure, all discussed in the previous chapter.

The materials I use, by contrast, are not traditional in a western fine art context. Rather they draw more closely on Hindu ritual and worship. The ephemeral quality of these pigments speaks, on one level, about the constantly changing systems within which I live, and, on another, symbolic level, they speak of the fading and disintegration of life. At the same time they also have a gentle yet visceral quality. For me, the material, which is essentially a powder, is extremely precious, partly because it is scarcely available in South Africa, but also because over time the artwork will change. All of this becomes a part of the artwork; this shift is inherent in the material. This is very much a part of my process in creating the work.

The image of the tongue, however subtle and small it is, should not be read as insignificant. The red pigmented surface is bright and bodily, but it is the tongue that draws the viewer into the work. This form, and the need for its meaning to be deciphered, is that with which the viewer immediately engages. Much like the goddess herself, the work is bold and assertive in colour, yet full of mysteries and difficult to understand.

Conceptually, these two works have an affinity in that they use Kāli iconography as a symbol of power to challenge the oppressive or patriarchal societies that we encounter very directly. Biswas explains in an interview called *Reworking Myths: Sutapa Biswas* that in Hindu culture all women are seen as goddesses. She further ironically explains that British culture sees Indian culture as oppressive (Biswas 1987). Biswas points out "The only way in which we now assess Asian culture is to say, Oh aren't they oppressed, what d'you think about arranged marriages? And we have to ask, why is it that women have arranged marriages? Arranged marriages were reinforced as an idea, with the invasion of

the British in the Indian Sub-continent because it was a fashionable concept which came from Victorian England. So I'm trying to put forward these images to make people ask, where is the link?" (Biswas, 1987, p. 38).

While Biswas draws on elements from the image of Kāli quite assertively, I do so less directly. This does not mean, however, that my image is less assertive in its meaning or reference to Kāli. Contrary to Biswas's work, my work is actually dealing with stereotypes and expectation laid upon women within the South African Indian community itself. My aim is to use the image of Kāli and what she stands for to create an alternative identity for the female within this community: a female who is assertive and challenges societal expectation. Perhaps the reason that this community still functions on some level as though it is stuck in the 1950's is because for so many years communities were forced to hold themselves together during apartheid, certain 'traditions' of behaviour have stayed with them.

Men were always seen as the bread winners and the women were expected to stay home, have babies and tend to the kitchen. And while these situations may have changed and more young Indian women are very successful in their careers, there are still underlying expectations that run through the community. There is a big jump between the generations who lived under apartheid and those educated in a democratic society, the latter of which I fall in to. The ideas and desires of these two generations are so varied that that both seem to be pushing to towards two extremes of living. On the one hand there is the expectation of marriage, family living, and a continuation of the family name and on the other hand it is a constant need to pull away from the community that restricts new ideas. The oppressions that affect the women of this community may not be as common as they once were, but they are still very much alive within traditional spaces. I am in no way suggesting that this lifestyle is or was unique to the Indian community. What I am suggesting is that while Indians in other parts of the world moved forward we in South Africa, to a certain extent, seem to stay stuck in ideas and belief systems that seem to me are no longer relevant.

My use of Kāli imagery is intended to challenge the boundaries that the South African Indian society has set for itself, while at the same time existing within this community. I see Kāli as an empowering female figure, and hope that more young women will use this innate feminine power embodied within the society to assert themselves, their beliefs and their desires to be independent women without the constant need to fulfil duties constructed based on their gender. Also inherent in Kāli is the balance of masculine and feminine, and we as a society, both South African and Indian need to get to a point where this duality is embraced and a part of how we view the world and each other. In both *Housewives with Steak Knives* and *It is 'kala' that devours all, but it is Kāli that devours even time* there is this sense of assertiveness. Both images are intended to challenge and engage with ideas of

oppression within patriarchal societies. In both works one can see there is an assertion of sexuality and power. Though each work deals with a different kind of oppression and power, they both use the image of Kāli to challenge certain ideas and ideologies.

The next work I will discuss in relation to my photographic work *Kāli Tandava* (2004-2008) is Chila Kumari Burman's *Shotokan*. As described before, in her four photographs Kumari Burman portrays herself as an aggressive woman who appears to be attacking the camera. She is dressed in a sari wrapped over leggings, which allows for more freedom of movement than normally offered by the drape of a sari. Her hair sways wildly with the movement of her body. The poses or movements performed in each photograph are taken from the Japanese martial art of Shotokan, of which Kumari Burman is a practitioner.

Kumari Burman's character is set against the backdrop of a mural, which was discussed in Chapter Three. Given the context within which these images are photographed, they become almost like street art. This in itself speaks of her certain kind of defiance, whether against political or social structures. By placing this woman clad in traditional Indian clothes within the context of the street, Kumari Burman is a ascribing a different sort of defiance to the character. Much like Biswas, she is addressing issues of being of Indian ancestry and working within a British patriarchal system. Unlike Biswas however, Kumari Burman uses her own image, her own body as a voice against this patriarchy. Here she becomes the defiant female.

These high energy poses become somewhat reminiscent of Bollywood film posters, with the heroine taking the lead role. The use of popular culture is central to Kumari Burman's artistic production, as it is through this modality that she challenges the system that applies stereotypes to her. In some ways she uses new stereotypes to disrupt old ones. In three of the four images her movements are captured in a moment of fierce attack; with her hair swaying wildly around her body as she punches, jumps into the air and kicks toward the camera. The unkempt nature of her hair, coupled with her angry facial expression, and her fists and feet attacking the viewer, create an image of a powerful, aggressive and somewhat comic-book-like heroine. The last of the four images is a still of her in a pose of attack. Unlike the previous images, there is no definite movement in this image. The emphasis is placed instead on the gaze of the female figure, which is somewhat reminiscent of Biswas's Kāli character.

In my photographic work *Kāli Tandava*, the dancer uses classical Indian dance and mime to convey a created narrative. Here, too, the character is wearing a sari that is wrapped over Punjabi pants, which are also traditionally worn as part of Indian women's garments and allow for ease of movement. The dancer poses in front of a black backdrop, the lighting and angle of shot is more important than the context within which the character is photographed. Towards the end of the multiple images of the

dancer she starts to remove a few aspects of her costume, those aspects being that which identifies her as the married Indian woman. And as she loses these signifiers of marriage, she becomes more aggressive, almost as if possessed by the power and defiance of the fearsome goddess.

While *Kāli Tandava* functions more obviously as a narrative of this female figure, *Shotokan* quite easily becomes like a comic book strip, where the heroine fights her male opponents who represent the patriarchal imperialist system. In both works, there is the absence of the person being attacked; rather it would seem that both works function as an attack on an intangible enemy. This enemy is patriarchy, a system that is so loaded and conditioned within the societies that these works were created in that it is virtually impossible to put a face to it.

Kumari Burman's images become quite spectacular in their display, with each image measuring 121.92 x 66cm. The figures in my image are comparatively quite small, the full size of *Kāli Tandava* is 90 x 75cm, which means that the recurring figure in the composite measures roughly 10 x 15cm in each movement. While *Shotokan* uses scale and aggression to attack the viewer, *Kāli Tandava* uses the subtly of language, sign and lexicon, while playing on the shifts towards and away from the traditions of the dance and Indian society, as a mode of quietly creating these new aggressive identities for the female.

While my image is intended to invert the dynamics of dance and society by both placing the female in the position of aggressor and ascribing the *tandava* or masculine style of movement to Kāli, it knowingly uses *hastas* that reference the goddess and speaks directly to that mode of representation of the female. Kumari Burman's images on the other hand unknowingly, or unintentionally, address the idea of Kāli as the dancer. Her still black and white moments become reminiscent of the dance battle between Kāli and Shiva, discussed in Chapter Two. However, in this work, as the viewer, we are only ever given the view of Kāli; we only ever see the challenge from the goddess's point of view, which ultimately gives her the role of importance.

The language of hair is also very different in these two artworks. Kumari Burman's character is wild and dishevelled; her hair is meant to sway around her body as it accentuates the force with which she attacks. In my image, hair becomes a key to the position of the female, to her authority, we see that as the character becomes stronger and more dominant so too her hair becomes looser and wilder. This again refers back to my interest in the use of hair as a sexual metaphor. By taking charge of her role as a dominant female within her home, and in society, she is also taking charge of her sexuality, and in turn embracing her sexual power, her latent feminine power.

While these two works may speak from different positions to two very diverse forms of patriarchy, the most prominent and important similarity is that in each image the female character becomes someone who in some way embodies a living presence of Kāli.

Conclusion

The work of Amar Kanwar

This dissertation has focused on the various aspects of the Hindu goddess Kāli. Through my study I have looked at her numerous physical attributes, the beliefs about Kāli's appearance within Vedic and Tantric traditions, the mythological tales used to gain an understanding of her complex nature, her relation to dance, defiance and sexuality, some aspects of her association with her male counterpart Shiva, and, lastly, I have placed her within a contemporary British and South African visual art context. Through the investigation of these different manifestations I have aimed to demonstrate the defiance inherent in the goddess Kāli, and how this characteristic is focused as a challenge to certain patriarchal expectations within a contemporary South African Hindu community. In conclusion of this investigation of the presence and potential significance of Kāli, I would like to introduce one final pertinent work as an example of the living proof of the Kāli principle existent within Indian women, which could be understood in a global context.

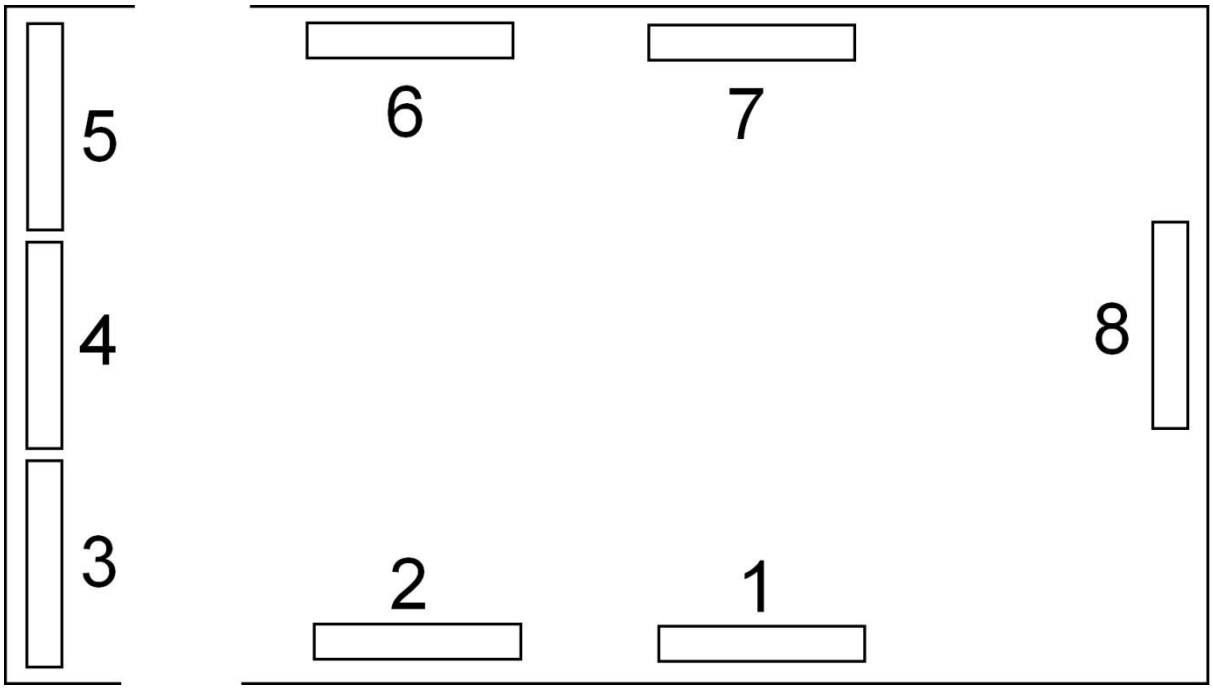
The artwork I refer to here is a video installation by the Indian film maker and artist Amar Kanwar. The particular work discussed was shown at Documenta 12, in Kassel in 2007, which I was fortunate enough to see when working on a four month scholarship at the exhibition in Germany. All the factual information about the work presented is from the Documenta Archives and from my notes taken during the artist's walkabout of the exhibition. My own thoughts and feelings about the work developed during the many hours of looking and re-looking at this work over a period in Kassel.

The work, entitled *The Lightening Testimonies* (figures 20-30), consists of eight video projections in which Kanwar focuses on the issue of sexual violence committed against women within the context of the Indian subcontinent. The images and stories date back to as early as the partition of India in 1947 and reach their conclusion in 2004. The work is complex and multi-layered and, as Kanwar states, "the terrain is political and sexual violence, understanding, responding and representing trauma, the body, the nation and the Indian subcontinent. The subtext is universal" (Amar Kanwar, Documenta Archive, 2007).

My immediate response to the artwork is, and was, that I am faced with my own prejudice when approaching a work of a male artist who is dealing with issues that are so intimately connected to women. However, he approaches this material with sensitivity, and with the purpose of empowering the stories of the young girls and women who are his subjects, and bringing gender-based violence to the attention of the world. The subject of rape is not easy to address and, I surmise, harder to be candid about within a conservative Indian cultural and moral context. These stories also reflect universal issues, shared by many across the world. South Africa itself has such a violent and

continuous relationship with this issue, due to social dysfunction and perverse beliefs such as the absurd notion that to have sex with a child (more precisely, raping a child), is believed to be a cure for HIV/Aids, or that the abuse or rape of young black lesbians is seen by perpetrators to be acceptable as a corrective act. Kanwar's film installation focuses on rapes committed in relation to political situations. The work deals very strongly with memory, representation and understanding. Kanwar believes that each community "archives" these situations differently, and that each community holds its memories in some location, whether they are spoken about or not. "The story never disappears. It exists in stones, in trees, in locations, objects, windows..." (Amar Kanwar, Talk at Documenta12, 12.06.07). He focuses not on why this violence is acted out but rather the brutality of this violence and the trauma of memory that comes after it.

Eight projection screens were placed in a darkened rectangular room in a very central position of the Neue Galerie, one of the most important galleries at Documenta. The screens were hung in an order that created a sense of narrative; however, while important, this narrative is not crucial to understanding the work. One wall held a single screen, opposite which there were three screens, and the other two walls held two screens each.



"How to remember? What remains and what gets submerged": these are the opening words by Kanwar as the projection begins. At first, all eight videos play the same images and texts simultaneously. The orange tree, the train, the window, these are the images we see, these are places, according to Kanwar, that hold the memory of certain incidents. These are all separate stories that in the end come together in one voice. The eight screens transform from being a singular image to becoming different stories in different places and times. Then finally seven screens go black and one

projection remains. This is where the stories seem to converge, and it is this video that becomes central to my discussion.

However, before I discuss this central video I would like to give the reader a brief description of the other seven videos. I begin with the screens on the right wall and will refer to them in my own number sequence, this screen being number one, and the central screen ending as number eight.

In video one we see a little girl weaving a red sarong, as she relates a story about her friend, a little girl who was attacked, raped and killed by soldiers of the Indian army. This story takes place in Nagaland, on the eastern border of India, a place that is rife with rape and brutality against women. At some point the girl's mother takes over the narration, but one never actually hears her voice, we read her words on the screen. For them to talk about the subject of rape is very difficult, and so this little girl, whose friend was attacked, is weaving a sarong with a particular pattern and colour in memory of her friend. Inevitably what happens is that this sarong comes to stand for the injustice of this rape and killing, and is, in some sense, also a form of protest. The patterns used are meant, according the mother, to represent dignity and beauty. Interestingly, this zigzag pattern that is chosen is also a symbol of defence or justice. The colour, red, that is used for most of the sarong, on one hand stands in for the anger of this girl who was attacked; as her mother says "her blood must have boiled…". This sarong was made in 1990, and is still worn by many women in the area today. When worn by a group of people it creates a statement of protest against sexual violence and murder.

Screen two is a story that takes place in 1956; it is the story of a woman called Mangyangkokla, and also takes place in Nagaland. The story begins in the Ungma village. On the 24 February 1957 the Indian army entered the village and picked her up, paraded her naked through the central streets and dragged her to the local church, where she was brutally raped for 3 weeks. Children watched from the windows, and no one could help her. She never spoke about the incident till just before she died, when she relayed the story, in great detail, to a man called Kaka Iralu, who has since told it on her behalf. The rest of the story goes that she was brutally raped by the Indian army for 6 days consecutively. She was again paraded naked through the streets of the village and no one dared to help her. For 60 years she kept her story a secret and carried with her the shame and guilt associated with it. Before her death she told her story to this man and asked him to repeat her story so that she would no longer remain silent. Before this she was too afraid and too ashamed to talk about what had happened to her. As Kanwar states, something always bears witness to the brutality that has taken place, something always holds the memory of it. In this instance it is an orange tree that bears witness. The orange tree was planted years ago when the village first developed and is still there today. Thus the orange tree becomes symbolic of an enduring presence during and after her capture and rape, and the tree continues to carry this memory once the victim is no longer present.

The next three screens are about the partition of India and the abduction of women during this time. Screen three talks about a woman, Mridula Sarabai, who aligned herself to a Ghandian philosophy and at the time of partition took responsibility for abducted women. Screen four looks at the technical definition of an abducted woman at the time as given by the government. The fifth screen talks about the rape of many Bangladeshi women by Pakistani Muslims around the time of Bangladeshi freedom. Here too the term "abducted woman" has to be defined

Screen six looks at the Hindu-Muslim conflict in Gujarat, and the mass rape that occurred in this region. In this screen we encounter one girl who tells her story. Screen seven which is next to screen six shows still drawings, mainly of the female nude.

Finally, screen eight is quite clearly the central story of the work, in that the viewer is constantly led back to it by way of editing and projection. In this screen one begins to understand female defiance in relation to a patriarchal system. This defiance is acted out; it is not merely an abstract issue that is created by an artist. At some point, all the other screens stop, and the viewer's attention is drawn directly to this central projection which begins to tell three stories that are an enactment of one central story.

This story begins from what is thought of as a legend in India, of a husband and wife who lived in the forest. They belonged to the Naxalite party and were hiding from the Indian army. Eventually they were found by the army and the husband was murdered in front of his wife. She was then raped by an officer, and passed on to the next officer, however, when this happened, she stripped. Here her naked body confronted the man who was about to violate her. As she did this the man retreated, he was confronted by what he was about to do, and found himself unable to meet the challenge.

In the 1970's this legend was addressed by the Indian feminist author Mahashweta Devi in her book of short stories called *Breast Stories*. The legend is retold in a story entitled "Draupadi",written by Devi in Bengali, a south Indian language. Then, in 2000, the story was found by a husband and wife playwright team from the eastern border of India, was translated from Bengali to Manipuri, and converted into a play. This play was acted out on stage and forms the next sequence of Kanwar's video, in which the wife, Sabitri, a well-known actress, strips on stage.

Needless to say, when the play was initially acted out publicly this confrontational presentation of nudity caused much controversy amongst the government, and even within liberalist groups. From this stage enactment we move to the last part of Kanwar's narrative which leads us to a true story of a girl by the name of Manormani, who was captured by the Indian army. She was accused of being a

terrorist and was brutally raped by them in 2004. We do not actually see the act on the video, but the repercussions of these actions are visible in the piece.

In the eastern state of Manipur, there are women called "Imas", a title given to mothers of the town. They are elderly women who have left their homes to live in, and for, the community as a whole. These mothers were outraged by this unfair brutality against Manormani, who was only one of many such cases. The mothers went to the gates of the Indian army, stripped naked and stood in protest against this brutality. The footage is captured by an amateur photographer and is later incorporated into Kanwar's video. Filled with rage, the Imas stand at the army gates, naked and wild with anger, hair untied and dishevelled, they scream and confront the locked gates filled with rage. Then when it seems that no one will listen, one of the mothers says "if you won't listen to me in my Hindi then I say it in English. Rape us, kill us, rape us kill us Indian army!" This confrontation is so raw and brutal; her body seethes with rage and her fierce eyes challenge and confront the army gates. As I sat and repeatedly watched this story unfold I was moved to a point of quivering anger, heart-breaking sadness and compassion. The reaction and retaliation of these older women literally gives birth to a modern day Kāli principle that is present in all females.

This narrative of this central screen starts as a legend; which is then translated into Bengali and then Manipuri, and eventually becomes a real life event, a protest against rape and brutality in contemporary Indian society. The act of stripping becomes a form of protest and confrontation. This is especially so in light of the first screen I discussed. The critical act of weaving clothing as an act of defiance is followed by undressing as protest, the former speaks of sign, symbol and covering as a form of protest. This juxtaposition of images and stories focuses on the act of dressing and undressing, of dignity and indignity, of protest and justice and of failure and success, in an attempt to address the position and treatment of the female within society.

What grips me most about this video installation is the emotion and rage with which these Imas confront the army. The layers with which Kanwar unfolds this story are captivating, and one episode informs the next, thus giving the viewer a deeper understanding of this situation. These Imas assert a Kāli-like behaviour and personality, both individually and as a fearsome group, as if she and her matriarchs have entered the battle field. They are wild, dishevelled, and naked and are absorbed in a frenzy of fury and bloodlust. Here they start to resemble the description of Kāli given at the beginning of this dissertation and they come to exemplify the power inherent in that iconography. These women actually start to shame the men by stripping on the doorstep of the army gates, which is meant to be a place that represents safety and whose purpose is to protect its people. The men never come out to face the women and one is left wondering what went through their minds as they watched the Imas confront them in this raw almost savage manner. This demonstration of power by the human

female shows that there is a space for female defiance within and against patriarchal systems. These women assert their power and defiance on a global level in the work by Kanwar, a male Indian artist. His artwork is not just about understanding and memory, but it is very clearly about defiance, and the confrontation of an issue that is most often ignored within a global context.

It is to this aspect of womanhood and the divine feminine within each human being that this dissertation speaks. In looking at the various aspects and mythologies of Kāli, her relation to sign and symbol, her involvement and invocation within Indian classical and folk dance, the embracing and use of reference to her by contemporary artists Sutupa Biswas, Chila Kumari Burman and myself, and lastly the compellingly beautiful video by Amar Kanwar, I have attempted to define and represent Kāli as a defiant female within contemporary art and Hindu society.

Chapter one and two speak of the Hindu notions that each human being is made up of both the masculine and the feminine. These aspects are intended to create unity and harmony between the sexes. It also sets out to portray notions of power and defiance that could be associated with Kāli. Chapter three and four look at the representation of Kāli, within contemporary art, as a female figure who is a demonstration of a formidable matriarchal prototype who operates within and against patriarchal systems. Biswas and Kumari Burman portray her as a female who stands up against imperialist Britain, both addressing this issue from the perspective of British women with Indian ancestry. In my own practice I use characteristics of the goddess to create abstract paintings that draw on the power of Kāli. Here sign and symbol become emblematic of Kāli's power, and it is with the subtle shifts in tone and texture that I engage with the ferocious attributes of the goddess. My relationship to both this dissertation and my artistic practice is one that engages in a moral, ethical and philosophical set of codes. This engagement of sign and symbol relates to a set of ideas and principles that are meant to empower and inspire. Within the photographic works I take this to the level of creating the feminine who embodies the Kāli principle through the use of dance mime. I speak from the position of a South African-born Hindu, and address issues of patriarchy within this particular community.

Scriptures and religious beliefs have aided me in presenting Kāli as a defiant female within this study. Similarly mythological and religious narratives have aided the other artists discussed to create narratives of the defiant female that are not necessarily existent, but do propose to address patriarchal issues. It is within the work of Kanwar that we see the living and active presence of Kāli within women in an Indian society. And it is also this powerfully collated and articulated work by an Indian male artist that foregrounds the Hindu belief that it is not the male or the female, but a tempered balance between the sexual energies that leads to wisdom and insight, a balance between attentiveness

and intelligence, the tender and the gruesome, the masculine and the feminine and finally, the moral and philosophical.

Together all of these manifestations of the defiant female focus and embody the Kāli principle, be it in the early traditional miniature paintings, the challenging gouaches produced near temples, the reciprocal traditions of Indian dance and sculpture, the echo into contemporary Indian art produced in its diasporic contexts of England and South Africa or the powerful capturing of sociological enactments of defiance in the medium of video.

With all this in mind I look back at the opening image of this dissertation. The striking beauty and ferociousness of the goddess once again captivates and draws me in. I am again awe struck by the power, confrontation and exquisiteness of this Kāli figure. Her threatening yet compassionate eyes fill me with both fear and devotion. With all that I have discussed and read in the process of this research, I now see her not only as the defiant, the brave, and the ferocious, but also as nurturing, loving, compassionate mother, creator, and destroyer. Her gentle yet controlled placement of her right foot, firmly on the chest of her male lover, Shiva, again asserts a metaphorical control and balance within patriarchy, philosophy and spirituality. Once again I bow in devotion to the magnificence of the great feminine whose power cannot be tamed, who is both gentle and gruesome at the same time, who is inspiring and challenging, and who fills the universe with the principle of female defiance and bravery. I bow to the fearsome goddess Kāli and the great feminine within me.

Reference List

Mythology

Ashley-Farrand, T. (2003). Shakti Mantras. USA: The Random House Publishing Group.

Chaturvedi, B.K. (2003). Devi Bhagawat Puran. India: Diamond Pocket Books (Pvt.) Ltd.

Harding, E.U. (1993). Kali: the black Goddess of Dakshineswar. Berwick: Nicolas-Hays Inc.

Kuryluk, E. (1987). Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex. USA: Northwestern University Press.

Mohanty, S. (2004) The Book of Kali. India: Penguin Books India.

Mookerjee, A. (1988). Kali: The Feminine Force. UK: Thames & Hudson Ltd.

Mookerjee, A & Khana, M. (1977). The Tantric Way. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd

Rawson, P. (1978). The Art of Tantra. 2nd ed. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.

Sharma, B. (2001). The Book of Devi: India: Penguin Books India.

Svoboda, A.E. (1993). Aghora: At the Left Hand of God. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.

Vedalankar, P.N. (ca. 1947). Shastra Navanitam: A concise study of Hindu Scriptures. Durban: Veda Niketan

Walker, B.G. (1983). The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets. USA: Harper and Row Publishers.

Dance

Caldwell, S. (1999). Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship the Goddess Kali. India: Oxford University Press.

Coomaraswamy, A. (1977). The Mirror of Gesture. New Delhi:Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt, Ltd.

Khokar, M (1986). Traditions of Indian Classical Dance. India: Clarion Books.

Kolapen, S. (1991). Glossary of Indian Dance. South Africa: MBS Graphics.

Viswanathan, L. (1984). Bharatanatyam: The Tamil Heritage. India: Sri Kala Chakra Trust.

Vatsyayan, K. (1996). Bharata: The Nātyasāstra. India: Sahitya Akademi.

Artists

Nead, L. (1995). Chila Kumari Burman: Beyond Two Cultures. London: Kala Press.

Biswas, S. (2004). Sutapa Biswas. London: inIVA.

Feminist Theory and Postcolonial Criticism

Barret, M . & Phillips, A. (1992). Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates. UK: Policy Press.

Bloom, L. (1999). With Other Eyes. London: University of Minneapolis Press.

Deepwell, K. (1995). New Feminist art Criticism. New York: Manchester University Press.

Goldstein, L. (1991). The Female Body; Figures, Styles, Speculations. USA: The University of Michigan Press.

Kumari Burman, C (1987). There Have Always Been Great Blackwomen Artists, in Robinson, H. Visibly Female: Feminism and Art: An Anthology. London: Camden Press Ltd.

Minh-ha, T. (1989). Woman, Native, Other. USA: Indiana University Press.

Mongia, P (1996) Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader. London: Arnold

Nead, L. (1992). Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality. London and New York: Routledge.

Nochlin, L. (1988). Women, Art and Power and Other Essays. New York: Harper and Row Publishers Inc.

Pollock, G. Tracing Figures of Presence, Naming Ciphers of Absence. In Bloom, L. (1999). With Other Eyes. London: University of Minnesota Press.

Reilly, M & Nochlin, L. (2007). Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art. London: Merrell Publishers Ltd.

Robinson, H. (1987). Visibly Female: Feminism and Art: An Anthology. London: Camden Press Ltd.

Roth, M. (1995). Reading between the lines: the imprinted spaces of Sutapa Biswas, in Deepwell, K (ed.) New Feminist Art Criticism. United Kingdom: Manchester University Press.

Tawadros, G (1989). Beyond the Boundary: the work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain, in Araeen, R (ed.) Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture, 8/9 Autumn/Winter, p. 121-150.

Tazi, N. (2004). Keywords: Gender: For a Different Kind of Globalization. Sub-Saharan Africa: Double Storey.

General

Cuny, M. & Rambali, P. (1997). I, Phoolen Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen. London: Warner Books.

Reed, E. (1975). Woman's Evolution: from matriarchal clan to patriarchal family. New York: Pathfinder Press.

Images discussed in research

Image reference list

Figure 1: Gandhi Roy; *Kali statue at the Dakshineswar Temple*; 1993; photograph sourced from - Harding, E.U. (1993). Kali: the black Goddess of Dakshineswar. Berwick: Nicolas-Hays Inc. (inner cover)

Figure 2: Calcutta (region); *The Goddess Kali*; 19th century; watercolour on paper sourced from Rawson, P. (1973). Tantra: the Indian Cult of Ecstasy. London: Tames & Hudson. (p.45)

Figure 3: Rajasthan (region); *Adhanāreswara*; c. 12th century; stone sourced from Mookerjee, A & Khana, M. (1977). The Tantric Way. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd. (p.37)

Figure 4: Kangra(region); *Kāli*; c. 18th century; gouache on paper sourced from Mookerjee, A & Khana, M. (1977). The Tantric Way. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd. (p.83)

Figure 5: Orissa (region); *Sakti seated in union with Siva*; c. 18th century; brass sourced from Mookerjee, A & Khana, M. (1977). The Tantric Way. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd. (p.17)

Figure 6: Gujarat (region); *Kāli dances the cosmic dance*; 16th century; stone sourced from Mookerjee, A. (1988). Kali: The Feminine Force. UK: Thames & Hudson Ltd. (p.80)

Figure 7: Nepalese; *Kurukullā*;c. 16th century; copper sourced from Coomaraswamy, A. (1977). The Mirror of Gesture. New Delhi:Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt, Ltd. (plate II)

Figure 8: Sarah Caldwell; *M.K. Sankaran Kutty Morar as Bhadrakāli in mutiyettu*; 1999; photograph sourced from Caldwell, S. (1999). Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship the Goddess Kali. India: Oxford University Press. (Cover)

Figure 9: Sutapa Biswas; *Housewives with Steak-Knives*; 1985; acrylic and pastel on paper; 274 x 244cm sourced from Biswas, S. (2004). Sutapa Biswas. London: inIVA. (p. 23)

Figure 10: Artemisia Gentileschi; Judith and Holofernes; c. 1620; oil on canvas; 199 x 162cm Sourced online, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artemisia_Gentileschi (on 10 March 2013)

Figure 11: Chila Kumari Burman; *Shotokan*; 1993; b/w photographs; 121.9 x 66cm (each) sourced from: Nead, L. (1995). Chila Kumari Burman: Beyond Two Cultures. London: Kala Press. (p.16-17)

Images for Amar Kanwar installation views can be obtained from Reshma Chhiba – reshmachhiba@yahoo.com

All other images photographed by Reshma Chhiba; 2007-2008

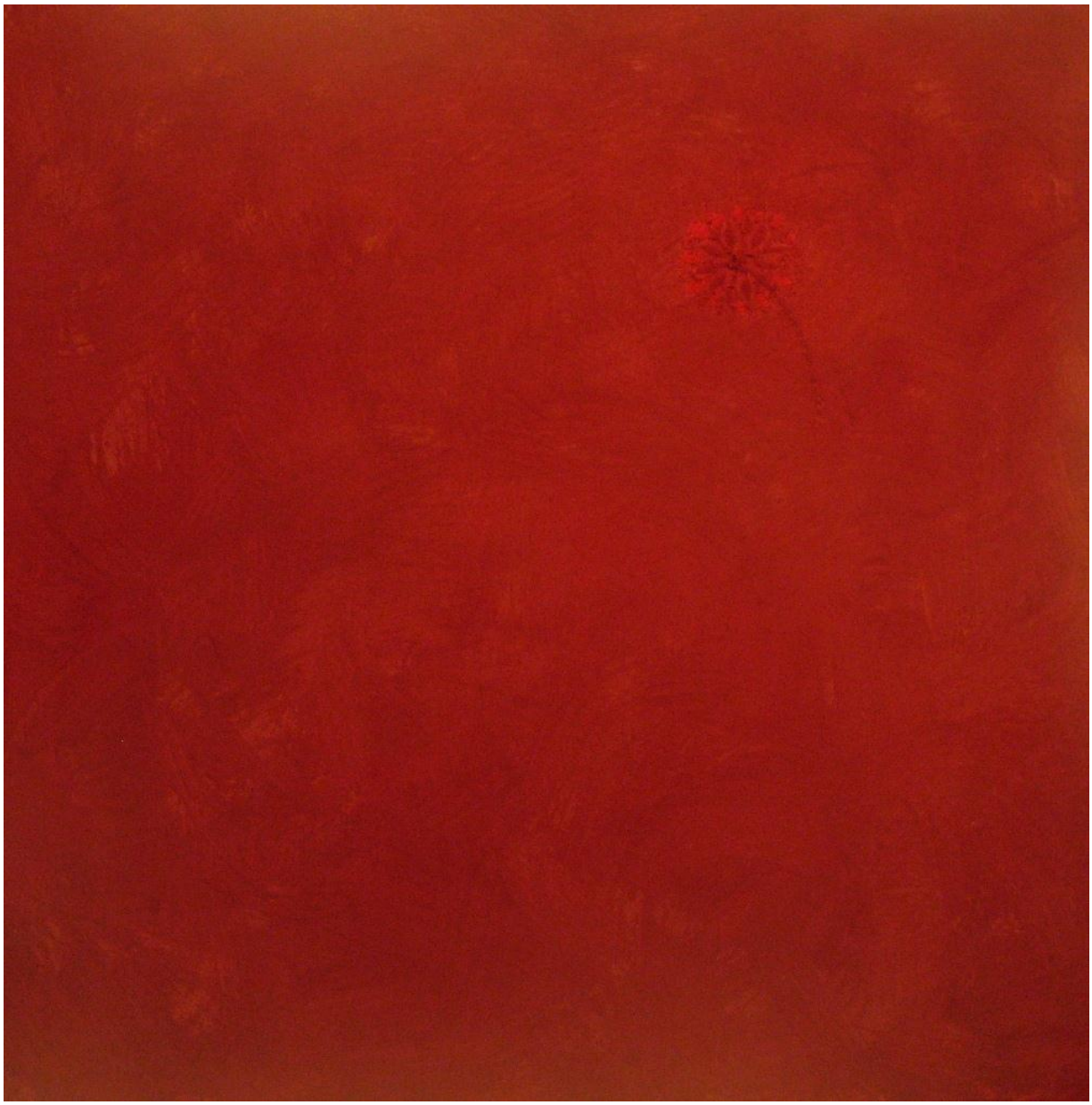
Works from the exhibition Kali; 2008 (practical component) by Reshma Chhiba; exhibited at Art Extra



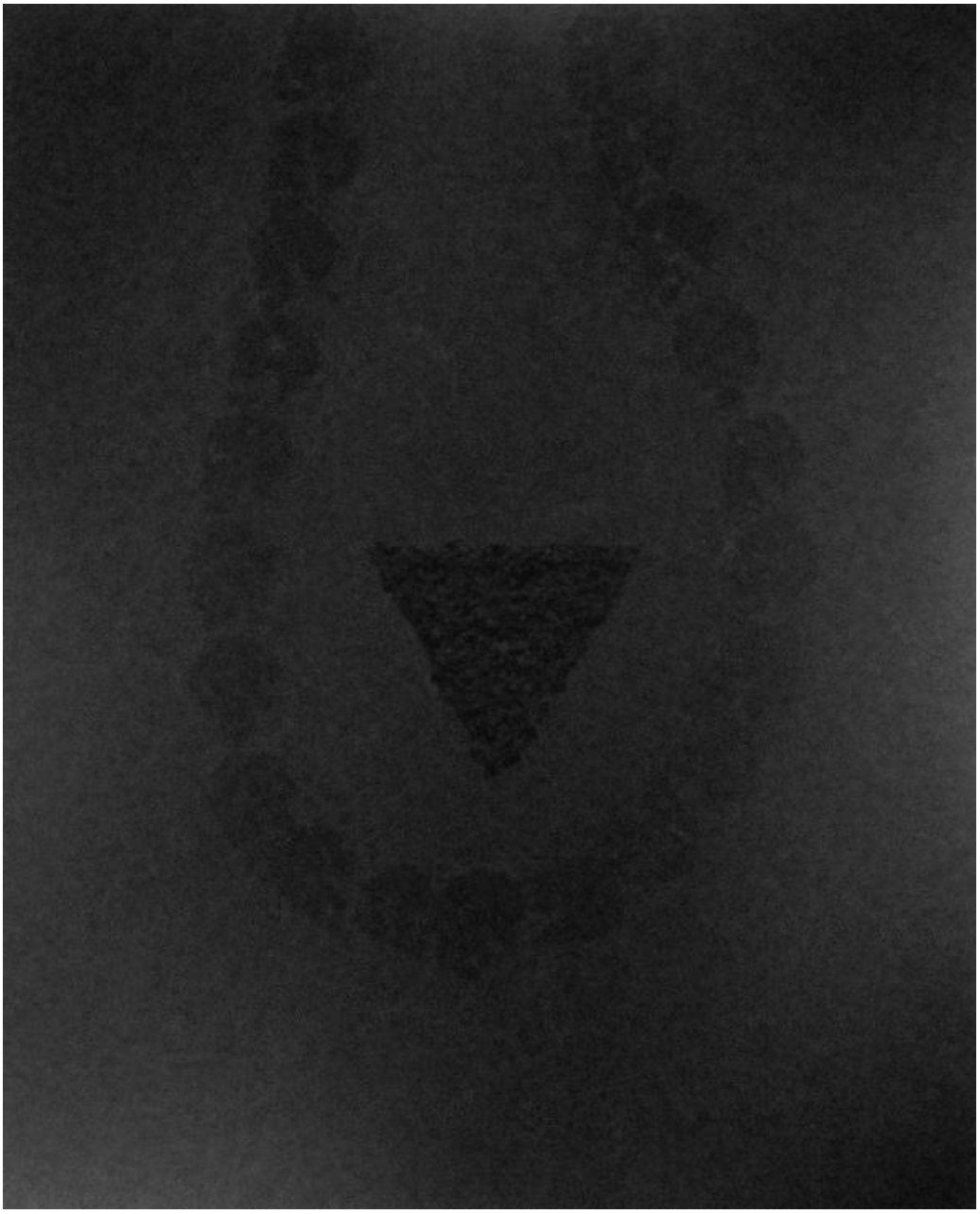
Reshma Chhiba; *Dhumāvati*; 2007; ash and thread on canvas; 100cm x 100cm



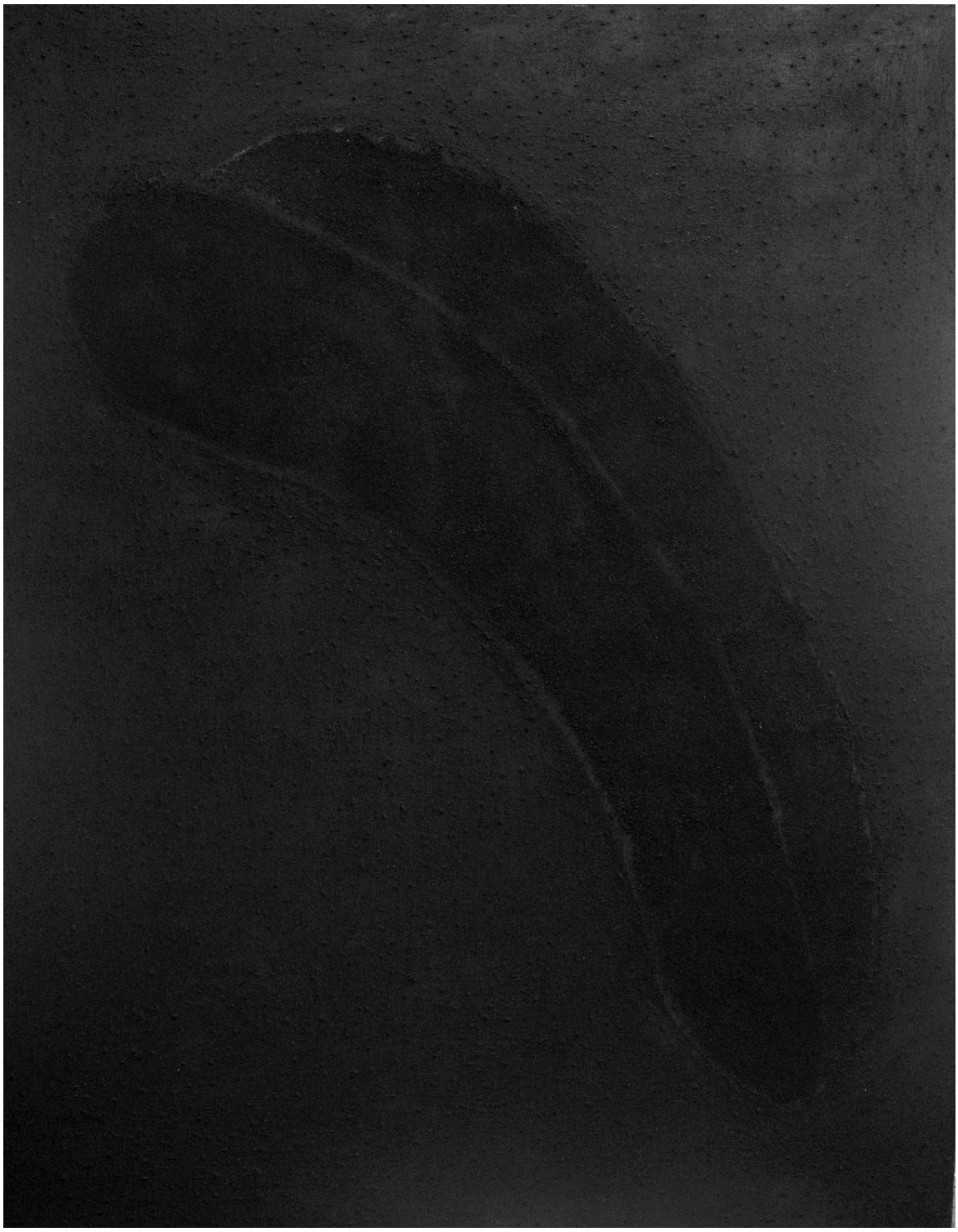
Reshma Chhiba; ***It is 'kala' that devours all but it is Kali that devours even time;*** **2007; kumkum powder; turmeric powder and thread on canvas; 100cm x 100cm**



Reshma Chhiba;Yoni; 2008, kumkum powder, turmeric powder and thread on canvas, 100 x100 cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Digambari (one who is clad in space)*; 2008; crushed coal and wool on canvas; 150cm x 120cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Devouress*; 2008; crushed coal and thread on canvas; 150cm x 120cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Untitled*; 2003, video installation (stills); variable dimensions



Reshma Chhiba; *Kali Tandava*; 2004-2008; pigment ink on cotton rag paper; 90cm x 75cm



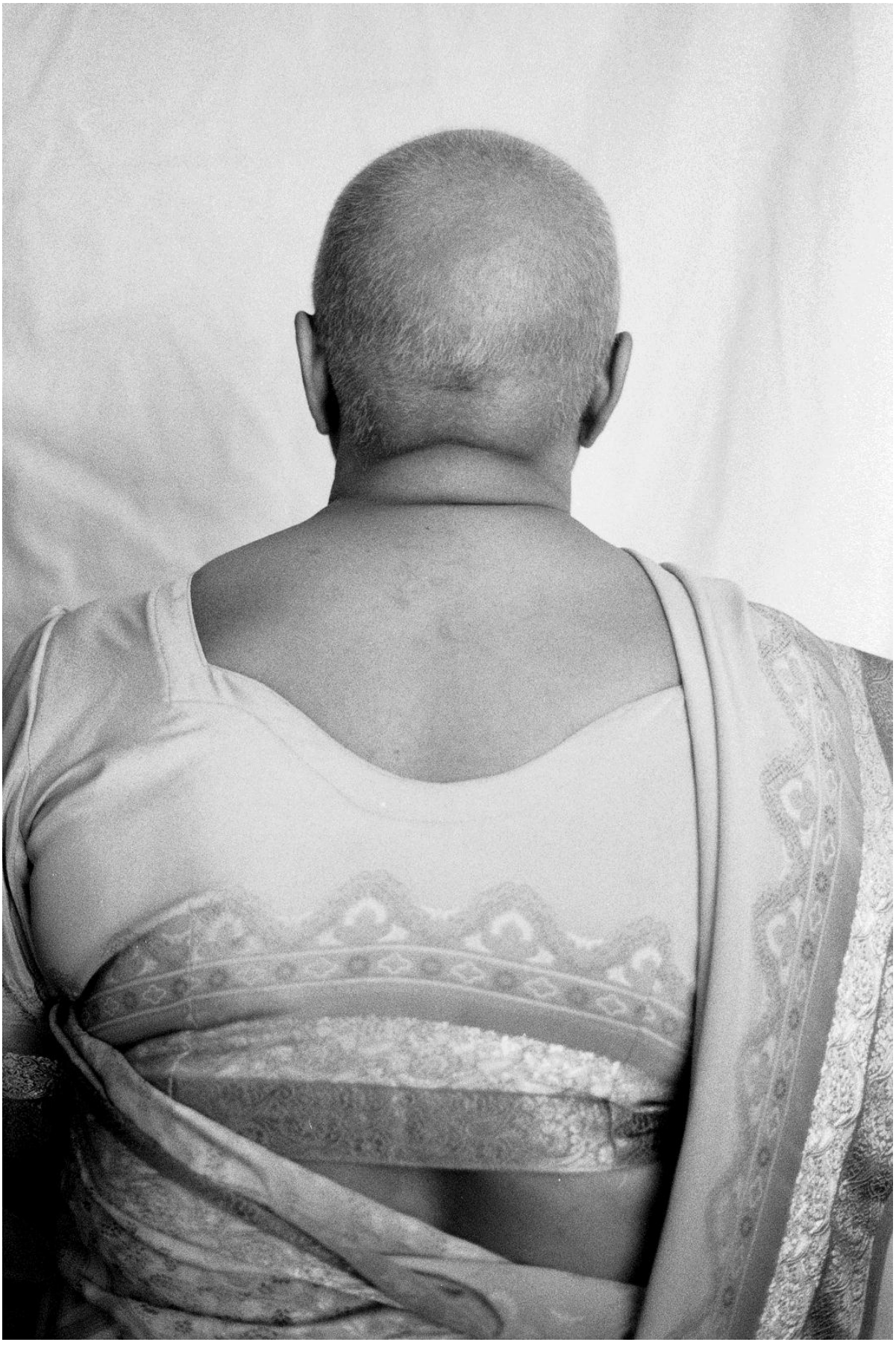
Reshma Chhiba; *Kalika*; 2008; pigment ink on cotton rag paper; 95cm x 112cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Unawakened*; 2008; pigment ink on cotton rag paper;60cm x 40cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Restrained*; 2008; pigment ink on cotton rag paper;60cm x 40cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Stripped*; 2008; pigment ink on cotton rag paper;60cm x 40cm



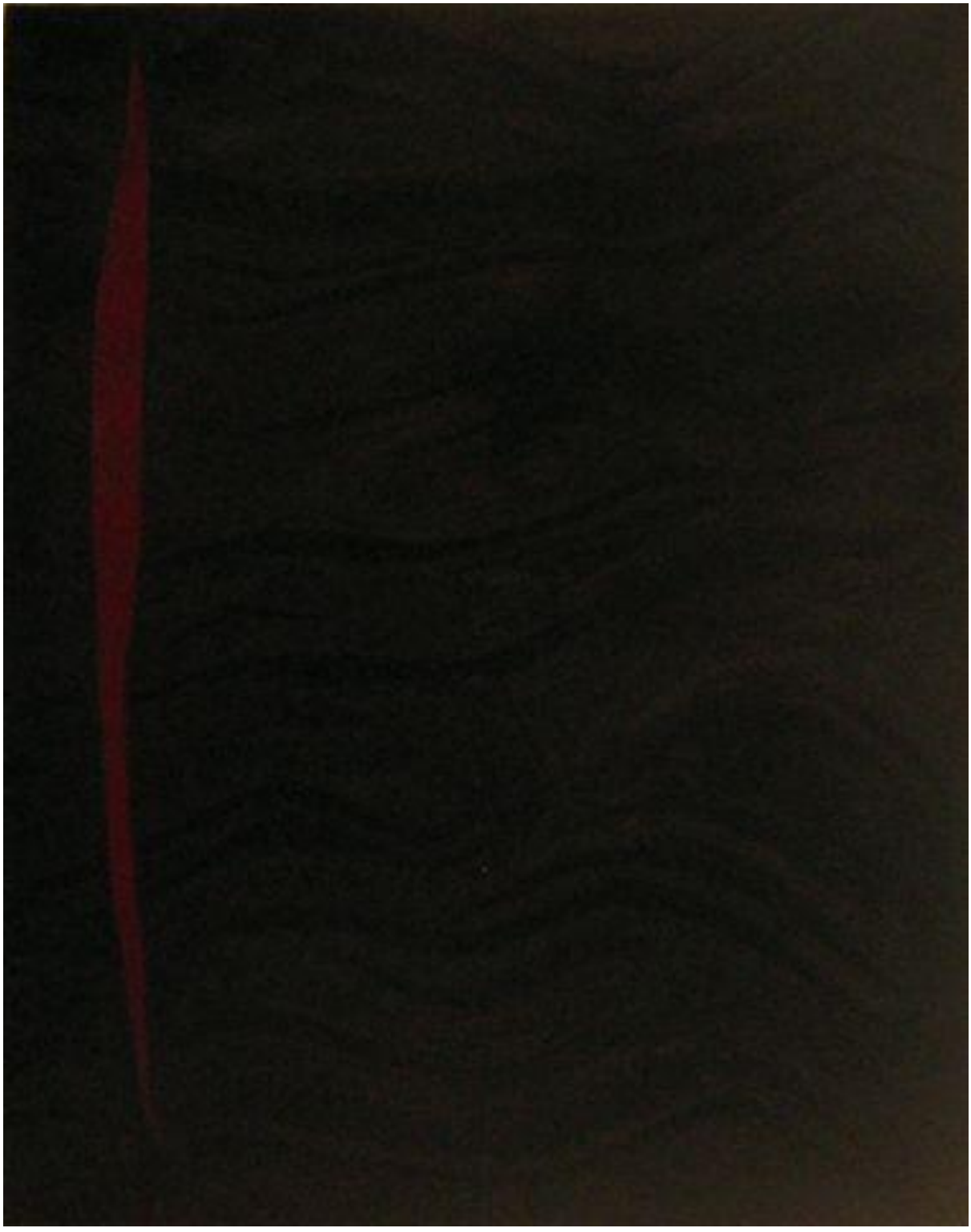
Reshma Chhiba; *Unbridled*; 2008; pigment ink on cotton rag paper;60cm x 40cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Wrathful Saviouress*; 2007, kumkum powder and thread on canvas, 100cm x 100cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Unthreading Bondage*; 2008; kumkum powder; turmeric powder and thread on canvas; 100cm x 100cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Sindoor*; 2008; crushed coal, kumkum powder and thread on canvas; 150cm x 120cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Maha Maya*; 2008; crushed coal, thread and wool on canvas; 150cm x 120cm



Reshma Chhiba; *Portrait of Kali*; 2008; ash, kumkum powder, wool, polystyrene, cushioning and thread on canvas; 50cm x 40cm



Reshma Chhiba; Revolt 1-5 (of 6); 2004; sari, thread, beads and transparency on stretcher frame; 120cm x 100cm (each)

Installation views of the exhibition Kali; 2008 by Reshma Chhiba; exhibited at Art Extra







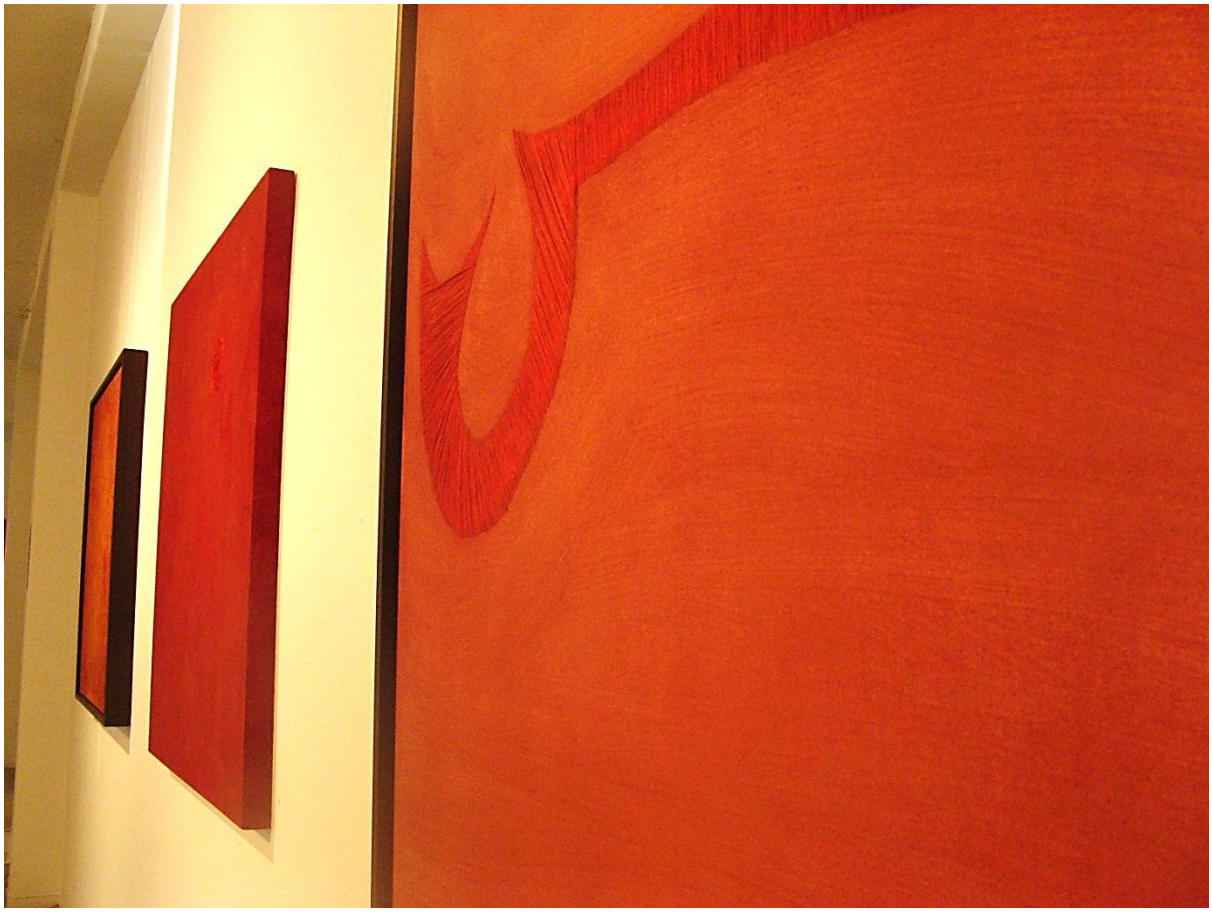






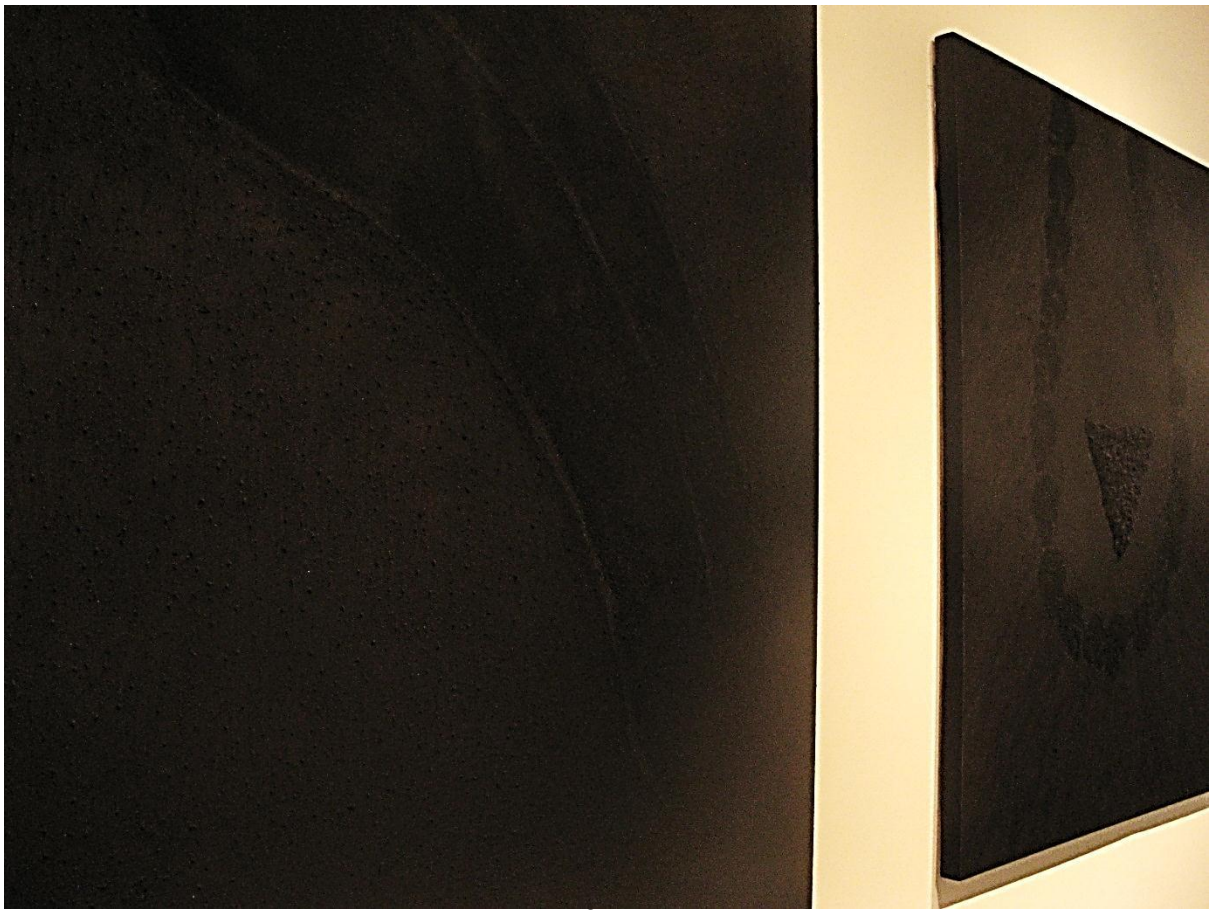


















Addendum A

In the first interview, conducted with Guru Sivaraman[29] of the Sri Devi Kurumariamman Temple, he explained Kāli worship as something extremely powerful and almost dangerous when done without the supervision of someone ordained in priesthood. This guru explained that Kāli worship in South Africa is very different to how it is performed in India. In South Africa, there is no animal sacrifice, and it is not performed on cremation grounds. In India worship within Tantric sects focuses heavily on animal sacrifice, the drinking of blood and worshipping at midnight on cremation grounds.

According to this guru, worship by South Africans in mainly done to ward off existing negativity within their lives. However, he further stated that amongst those who worship the goddess on their own property (not on temple grounds, grave sites or forests), their own backyards attracted much negative energy. The reason he gives for this explanation is that Kāli is a fierce goddess who is only associated with the annihilation of negative forces. She does not possess any nurturing or motherly qualities. She is effectively connected with this Kali Yuga, the age of destruction that Hindus believe we are currently in, as explained above. There is a considerable following of this goddess in South Africa.

When speaking about her qualities, the guru interviewed tends to focus on her anger. According to his understanding, Kāli is angry because she lost the dance battle to Shiva,[30] a point he emphasises many times during the interview. From my perspective this is a very simple understanding of the goddess and he does not seem to delve deeper into her manifestations or the myths that surround her. One must bear in mind that he is, of course, speaking from the perspective of a guru of a temple that is dedicated to goddess energy that is not necessarily a fierce incarnation.

The second interview was conducted with, Prakash Diar[31], a Kāli worshipper and the owner of the Kali Amman Sangam, which in essence is a small temple in his backyard. Although he owns three such temples and performs all the obligatory ceremonies and rituals, he is not ordained as a priest and does not wish to be. His reasoning for this is that he was taught by a priest and has been doing this for years, and as such does not feel the need to enter an order of priesthood. Much like the guru, he too does not believe in animal sacrifice as part of Kāli worship.

[29] He is a South African born South Indian Hindu who was ordained as a priest in India. He is the head priest and conducts all ceremonies in this temple.
[30] I will speak about this in greater detail in Chapter 2 when I look specifically at Kāli in a dance form.
[31] A young South African Hindu male, whose parents are Gujarati and Hindi speaking, both of which stem from north Indian ancestry. He learnt about Kāli worship from a south Indian priest in South Africa.

Diar is also of the belief that Kāli worship is very powerful in protecting one against the negative forces that are so prevalent in this Kali Yugam. However, his understanding of the goddess is contradictory to that of Guru Sivaraman. According to Diar, the goddess is a motherly nurturing figure, whose appearance is fierce and powerful to ward off negativity and protect her children-devotees. He does not see her as vicious.

Given that the priest has a more orthodox view of the goddess, I felt that I could not pursue any questions surrounding her sexuality and the idea of her as the defiant female. With Diar I was able to ask these questions.

In response to her sexuality, Diar, a staunch believer in great goddess power, said he had never really thought about this aspect of the goddess, and, in some senses, ignores it. When asked about the defiance of the goddess his immediate response was that he does not see her as the defiant female. His explanation is that the goddess is ultimately a motherly figure, whose appearance is fierce. His reading of this is that a mother does not necessarily look the way we expect her to - she is not always beautiful - but when she cares about her children she will always pull them back on track if she feels that they are straying from the 'correct' path. Her terrible appearance is one that is meant to remind us that she has no pride or ego.

In response to Diar's comment on defiance, I do think that it is important to see the goddess as a motherly figure. But once again, Diar, like the priest, is speaking from his particular viewpoint and experience of the goddess. In both these cases, the goddess fills a particular expectation for these men. She somehow does not seem to be given the freedom that I would expect from or for the goddess of death, destruction and time. Here, while these devotees may worship her with reverence and love, they nonetheless place this female within a box that suits their needs.