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The Emancipation of Goddess Kali

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The Emancipation of Goddess Kali in the Songs of Ramprasad Sen

By

Edmund Weber

Introduction

In the poems of the great Bengali poet Ramprasad Sen we see female emancipation is not restricted to human beings only but to divine ones, too. In this case a mythical figure¹, Kali, the Mother-Goddess, liberates herself from the bondage

¹ The ground of human existence is not at the disposal of human beings. Its articulation is the matter for religion, whereas all the concretisations of existence organised by the capacities of human beings constitute culture. Religion has to be mythical in order to secure the indefinable condition of human existence. Substituting it by pseudo-rational definitions a non-mythical articulation only covers the indefinability. Then a serious look at the existential ground is not possible anymore, and the human being is at the mercy of his illusionary self-definitions. Therefore, contending the so-called 'Giving Meaning' as the main duty of religion turns upside down. Reason is 'Giving Meaning' is nothing than a cultural fabrication, moreover it is the most aggressive and dangerous illusion about human existence. In vain but with horrible consequences the cultural ideology of 'Giving Meaning' tries to constrain the infinite base of existence into narrow cultural patterns, what religion has always to correct. Articulating the existential ground by mythology the consciousness is aware that is not able to seize its ground but can only have a tangential approach to it. Mythology is the weapon of religion to avert the illusionary seizing of what is not sizable. Therefore, the very antagonist positions, the pseudo-rational criticism of myths as well as the fundamentalist pseudo-scientification of mythology, are completely off the subject.

of a mother who has been and is still misused as a slave by religiously infantile males.

Kali is worshipped as Mother by millions of Hindus still today. Most of the Bengali Hindus call themselves daughters or sons of Kali Ma.

However, Kali, the Mother, showed herself as unwilling to subdue herself under the religious wishes particularly of her male worshippers.

One of the victims of her emancipation was Ramprasad Sen (1720-1780). And just as a victim of Mother Kali he has been and still is regarded as king of poets. Amazingly, 350 of his songs are fervently sung by people of all castes throughout Bengal and around even today. His poems were translated into English and scholars show more and more interest in this modern appearing poet.

Ramprasad's relationship to Kali has been like the relationship of most of the Indian males to their natural mother. These mothers mostly prefer sons to the daughters. They try to bind the sons to them in order to get a protector and provider if they become old or a widow.

However, because of this extreme clinging of a mother to her son the anti-women culture produces the paradoxical ideology that a male is absolutely dependant on his mother for ever. The result of that ideology is hatred against women, which once had reached its peak in the son's burning of his mother to death called suttee.

Ramprasad very precisely expressed this ambiguous relationship on the religious level in his poems to Mother Kali.

He pretends to break away from her because she does not serve him according to his wishes but insists on her independence and freedom. Kali, his Mother, who gave him his life and will take it away, refused to relieve her adult yet infantile son of his existential self-responsibility. She did not fall in his desire for mothering.

Ramprasad was very disappointed, embittered, and full of despair. He accused Mother Kali of letting him down even if Death is coming to take him away. She behaves like a mother cat that does not feed her adult offspring anymore and by aggressively hissing frightens it off into independence. She does not care about any enemy threatening her offspring.

Nevertheless, he asks himself if Mother Kali could not drive away his fear of Death at least. He knows it is indeed an absurd question showing his helplessness. The reason is very clear: Death is not Kali's enemy but her husband, Shiva, to whom she is very closely connected. Why should Kali take away one's fear of Death? Then Ramprasad had to conclude from Kali's emancipation: he himself has to cope with living and dying.

Full of bitterness he recognizes his wild and beautiful Mother. She is not his servant but a free mother; free from mothering a son who has become an adult and self-responsible man. He knows he won't have any choice as accepting his fate of being old, sick, lonely, and of dying in the end.

However, even if his Mother's wild nature makes it impossible for him to control her, her beauty fascinates him so much that he can not escape her. Despite

of all frustration deep in his consciousness Ramprasad is overwhelmed by the wild nature of Mother Kali.

The beauty of her wild nature mirrors the attraction of the unbound freedom of human consciousness so that nothing can separate humans from it. Ramprasad wrestles with that fascinating and horrifying freedom in his poems. Some of them are recited here.²

Three Songs

Nr. 19

Facing his existential troubles Ramprasad is outraged at his Mother's refusal to treat him as a helpless child. Therefore he calls her to be a stone like her father, the cold and stony Himalaya, and upset he even questions her motherhood.

*You think motherhood is child play?
One child doesn't make a mother if she's cruel.
Mine carried me ten months and ten days
But doesn't notice where I have gone when it's time to eat.
When a child is bad, his parents correct him,
But You can watch Death come at me
With murder in His heart
And turn away yawning.
Ramprasad asks: Who taught You to be so cold?
If You want to be like Your father –
Stone – don't call Yourself
The Mother.*

Nr. 50

Knowing Kali will not protect him from Death he clutches at a straw by misusing Kali's name for magic practice. However, his rhetoric answer shows the uselessness of such a trick.

*Alright Death,
Here I am.
I've drawn a circular around me
With Kali's name.
The Great Death, Kali on His chest,
Has taken Her feet to His heart.
Remembering that Her feet
Cancel all fear.
Who needs to fear Death?*

Nr. 18

² Quotations are taken from: *Grace and Mercy in Her Wild Hair*. Selected Poems to the Mother Goddess by Ramprasad Sen. Translated by Leonard Nathan & Clinton Seely. Boulder 1982.

Facing the unrestricted and unrestrictable freedom of Mother Kali Ramprasad gives up with resignation his wishes. She knows what suits her son; therefore all his self-made desires are nothing than existential illusions:

*Who can explain Your play, Mother?
 What do You take, what give back?
 You give and take again.
 For You dawn and dusk are the same.
 Nothing can stop Your perfect freedom.
 You give exactly what's deserved.*

...

*I see what You show me – a stone
 Floating on water.
 Ramprasad is Your son.
 He can see right through those old ploys.*

The poet recognizes Kali's freedom, which implicates he cannot use her for his own ends that is to say escaping age, disease, loneliness and death. He knows: Kali freely gives life and takes it away without any justification. More than that: she makes human existence like "a stone floating on water" incomprehensible, even absurd - in the eyes of humans. A definite judgement about the human life is not at all possible, and therefore all so-called 'Giving Meaning' to life and death is mythically spoken a vain attempt to make the Mother Goddess one's own servant.

Conclusion

Ramprasad's songs are prophetic hymns describing modernity where women are free persons who can not be misused as caring slaves of exploiting men. Ramprasad experienced a situation, which was still utopian for the masses of his time: losing the childish dreams of an overprotective will say overservile Mother Goddess. He comprehended his human condition as free, as indefinable and therefore uncontrollable. The reality of his existence did not follow his definitions of life. His existential substance called Mother Kali destroyed his fantastic hopes of a motherly shaped golden paradise, and forced the experience on him a human being will never be able to grasp his existence at long last.

Once misused as an opiate by her son Kali emancipated herself from his slavery. She liberated herself from the illusions of existential definitions of the then male dominated culture. Therefore, learning the hard way of authentic life, Ramprasad could face the reality of human condition.

The realistic songs of Ramprasad are an existential revelation: By changing herself in the consciousness of Ramprasad and in this way liberating herself from his unrealistic demands on life Kali, the female shaped Holy or indefinable ground of existence, gave birth to an emancipated female culture when the male rule was a matter of course.