

The Countenance of a Goddess: Kālī Portrayed in Marguerite Yourcenar's *Kali Beheaded*

The purpose of this paper is to show how the traditional Indian image of the goddess Kālī was adapted by Marguerite Yourcenar in her short story, *Kali Beheaded*. The first section will concern the depiction of Kālī in the most famous passages regarding the goddess, in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Mahābhārata* and in the *Devīmāhātmya*. The Sanskrit texts will be translated and analysed. The second part of the paper describes how the goddess was portrayed in Yourcenar's story and an attempt is made to determine what exactly inspired Marguerite Yourcenar.

First, a few words about the author of *Kali Beheaded*. Marguerite Yourcenar was born Marguerite Cleenewerck de Crayencour in 1903 in Brussels. The girl did not know her mother, who died just ten days after having given birth. She was raised by her father who is said to have taught her Latin when she was only ten and classical Greek when she was twelve. Her father also encouraged her to write, helping her create her *nom de plume* and publish her first novel, *Alexis*, in 1929.

In 1948, she moved to the United States of America to live with her great love and faithful translator, Grace Frick, although *The Memoirs of Hadrian*, her most famous work which she had been writing for over ten years, was published in 1951 in France. It instantly became a bestseller and in 1980 Marguerite Yourcenar received the great honour of becoming the first female member of the Académie Française. She died in 1987 in Maine.

This short introduction of Marguerite Yourcenar¹ should suffice, but I must add a quotation from an article by Henri Peyre, which illustrates what a unique person and scholar Mme Yourcenar was:

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¹ For biographies see: Josyane Savigneau, Marguerite Yourcenar, *L'invention d'une vie*, Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1993 (translated into English by Joan E. Howard: *Marguerite Yourcenar: Inventing a Life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.) George Rousseau, *Marguerite Yourcenar: A Biography*, London: Haus, 2004. However, Marguerite Yourcenar insisted that her private correspondence to her partner, Grace Fick, be opened only fifty years after her death (in 2037) so, until then, her innermost feelings will be a secret even to the most inquisitive biographer.

Her formidable culture must have struck her contemporaries with awe: classical and medieval Latin had no secrets for her, nor had the language of theology and of medieval alchemy. As a very young woman she published a translation of the most abstruse of Greek poets, Pindar. Later she devoted several years to an expert rendering into French of the ancient Greek lyricists, from Tyrtaeus and Sappho to Proclus, covering some twelve centuries (Peyre 1983: 192).

Marguerite Yourcenar was enthusiastic about not only classical Europe but she also often turned to the East for inspiration.² The most significant example, *Oriental Tales*, is a collection of stories published as *Nouvelles orientales* in 1938. “As her interest as a teenager in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and ‘Kāli décapitée’ in *Nouvelles orientales* (1938) certainly attest, Yourcenar’s interest in Oriental philosophies is of long date. But it was only much later in her career that she began to study them in more depth” (Colvin 2005: 118).

The edition of *Oriental Tales* I drew on was translated into English by Alberto Manguel in collaboration with the author in 1985. The stories are either loosely based on well-known myths and local heroes or invented by Yourcenar³ and, as an indologist, I found *Kali Beheaded*⁴ to be the most interesting tale. However, before I introduce and analyse the narrative, I would like to present Kālī as she was seen by the ancient Indians.

Images of Kālī

Kālī is now chiefly perceived as the malevolent wife of Śiva. The god is said to have one wife (often called the Mother-goddess) who has various aspects. There

² It is worth noting that France was one of the first countries where genuine interest in Indian literary traditions was cultivated. A.H. Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) was first to acquaint Europe with Upanishads and in fact it was he who started serious scholarly work on Indian culture and literature. The famous orientalist, Antoine-Léonard de Chézy (1773–1832) was one of the first Europeans to translate directly from Sanskrit (*La Reconnaissance de Sacountala* (1830), *L’Anthologie érotique d’Amrou* (1831)). Also, Eugene Burnouf (1801–1852) translated the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Lotus Sutra* directly from the Sanskrit. In 1844 he published *Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme indien*. Other translations into French from this period include translations of the famous *Mṛcchakaṭika*: an unpublished translation by Auguste Barth (1863) and *Le Chariot de Terre Cuit*, translated by Paul Regnaud, published in 1877. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* as well as Kālidāsa’s oeuvre in Hyppolyte Fauche’s (1797–1869) translations were well known in Europe. Simone Alexandre Langlois’ work, *Samkhya*, which appeared in 1852, is still an important resource for Indologists.

³ The stories are: *How Wang-Fo Was Saved*, *Marko’s Smile*, *The Milk of Death*, *The Last Love of Prince Genji*, *The Man who Loved the Nereids*, *Our Lady of the Swallows*, *Aphrodisia*, *The Widow*, *Kali Beheaded*, *The End of Marko Kraljević*, *The Sadness of Cornelius Berg*.

⁴ *Kāli décapitée* was published in *La Revue Européenne* 4 in April 1928. It was reprinted in *Nouvelles orientales* in 1938.

is the benevolent facet in the forms of Pārvatī, Satī or Gaurī but the goddess also has a darker side found in Durga, Caṇḍī and Kālī. In popular opinion, Kālī is the goddess of war, death and eternal destruction. The name Kālī is a feminine adjective which simply means 'the black one' (from the Sanskrit: *kāla*). *Kāla* also means time and, as Thomas Coburn rightfully notices, the name also implicates that the goddess is, "that which brings all things to an end, the destroyer" (Coburn 1998: 108).

According to a well-known Indian legend, Kālī was created by Brahma, Śiva and Viṣṇu, who were enraged when they heard that the lesser gods had been defeated in battle by the demon Mahiṣa. Their fury led to the creation of the goddess:

Śiva's flame became her face, the strength of Yama – her hair, the might of Viṣṇu created her hands, the moon-god created her breast, she was enveloped in Indra's power and force, Varuṇa's strength gave her legs, Prthivī, the earth-goddess, created her hips, her heels were made by Surya, teeth – by Brahma, eyes – by Agni, brows – by the Āśvins, nose – by Kubera, ears – by Vāyu (Erman and Tiomkin 1987: 171).⁵

The gods also gave her all their weapons and sent her into combat. An epic battle ensued in which the goddess had to use all her wits and the various artillery she had been given, as the demon continuously changed form in order to escape the furious warrior-woman. She managed to defeat Mahiṣa and disappeared, telling the gods to call on her if they were ever again in such danger.

Kālī is also famously the only being ever to conquer the god Śiva. In the states of Bengal and Orissa, the predominant iconography of the goddess shows her standing on the prostrate body of her husband, her tongue hanging out of her mouth. There are many interpretations of this depiction; some say that Kali, being the Supreme Mother, dominated over even the mightiest gods, others that the goddess merely forgot herself during a bloody battle and now she is biting her tongue for the shame of what she has done to her husband.⁶

Kālī starts appearing frequently in Sanskrit texts around 600 CE, in the Purāṇas.⁷ She was associated with battle and whiled away her time in the most despicable places: the battlefield or the cremation ground. A famous episode from the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (9th century CE) gives us a glimpse of how she was perceived. The text below speaks of Bhadrakālī, the more 'gentle' aspect of the goddess (Sanskrit *bhadra*, literally means auspicious or friendly):

⁵ Translated from Polish by the author. Tiomkin writes that this account of Kālī's birth can be found in the *Devīmāhātmya*, a text that will be discussed later on in this paper.

⁶ See: Usha Menon, *Mahādevī as Mother: The Oriya Hindu Vision or Reality* in (Pintchman 2001: 37–55).

⁷ A class of sacred works said to treat of 5 topics – the creation of the universe, its destruction and renovation, genealogies of gods and heroes, the reign of the Manus (great sages), the history of the solar and lunar races.

BhP V.9.12–18

12. Then a certain leader of the villains who wanted to have a child decided to offer a man as a sacrificial animal to the Bhadrakālī.

13. The sacrificial man escaped by chance and the followers [of the leader of the villains] ran in many directions. Covered by darkness, at midnight, they could not find the sacrificial man. Unexpectedly, they saw the illustrious son of [the sage] Aṅgirā sitting in the hero's position, fending off antelope, boars and such.

14. Then, finding him faultless in every way [i.e. fit for a sacrifice], they understood that their master's work was completed. They tied him with cords and took him to the temple of Caṅdikā [Kālī], their mouths hanging open with happiness.

15. Then the thieves bathed him in accordance to their rites, covered him in new garments, gave him garlands, ornaments, anointed him, put a mark on his forehead and so on. He was fed and, accordingly to the rules of ritual murder, requiring offerings from incense, lanterns, wreaths, dried grain, twigs, shoots and fruits, accompanied by the noise of songs and hymns as well as *mṛdaṅga* and *paṇava* drums, he was made to sit in front of the Bhadrakālī.

16. Afterwards, a thief [acting as a priest] wanting to offer the sacrificial man's blood-nectar to the goddess Bhadrakālī, hefted a sharp and dreadful blade which had been consecrated by mantras.

17. Thus the villains, whose nature was that of passion and ignorance, whose minds were full of greed, conceit, ardour and pride followed the evil path and disregarded the Lord's fraction, the heroic caste [the Brahmins.] They trod the evil path and took pleasure in violence and they wanted to do the dreadful deed of killing even a Brahmin-sage's son, who had actually become one with Brahman, a paragon of virtue, someone who was kind to all beings. All of a sudden, perceiving this killing not permissible even in imminent danger of life, the figure of the goddess split asunder, burning intolerably with sacred fire. She was indeed the Bhadrakālī.

18. Furious, possessed by rage, moving her creeper-eyebrows violently, her face was dreadful with her curved teeth and red eyes. It was as if she wanted to destroy the world. She let out a thunderous, angry laugh and jumped from the alter, cutting off the wicked thieves' heads with their very own sword. She drank their hot blood, flowing like nectar, with her followers and, overwhelmed with their excessive drinking, they danced and sang loudly. They also played a sport of sorts, using the heads as balls.⁸

⁸ BhP V (translated by the author):

atha kadācit kaścid vṛṣala-patir bhadra-kālyai puruṣa-paśum ālabhatāpatya-kāmaḥ ||12
tasya ha daiva-muktasya paśoḥ padavīm tad-anucarāḥ paridhāvanto niśi niśītha-samaye
tamaśvṛtāyāṃ anadhigata-paśava ākasmikena vidhinā keḍārāṇo vīrāsanaena mṛga-
varāhādibhyaḥ samrakṣamāṇam aṅgiraḥ-pravara-sutam apaśyan || 13

atha ta enam anavadya-lakṣaṇam avamṛśya bhartṛ-karma-niṣpattim manyamānā baddhvā
raśanayā caṅdikā-grham upaninyur mudā vikasita-vadanāḥ ||14

atha paṇayas taṃ sva-vidhinābhiścicyāhatena vāsasācchādyā bhūṣaṇālepa-srak-tilakādibhir
upaskṛtaṃ bhuktavantaṃ dhūpa-dīpa-mālyā-lāja-kisalayaṅkura-phalopahāropetayā vaiśasa-
samsthayā mahatā gīta-stuti-mṛdaṅga-paṇava-ghoṣeṇa ca puruṣa-paśuṃ bhadra-kālyāḥ purata
upaveśayāṃ āsuḥ || 15

atha vṛṣala-rāja-panih puruṣa-paśor aśṛg-āsavena devīm bhadra-kālīm yakṣyamāṇas tad-
abhimantritam asim ati-karāla-niśitam upādade ||16

iti teṣaṃ vṛṣalānāṃ rajas-tamaḥ-prakṛtīnāṃ dhana-mada-raja-utsikta-manasāṃ bhagavat-
kalā-vīra-kulaṃ kadarthī-kṛtyotpathena svairam viharatām himsā-vihārāṇāṃ karmāti-

We see here one of the earliest descriptions of the Kālī, a fearsome guardian of the ritual law which prohibited the killing of Brahmins, even if they had committed a crime. The lowly thieves (who are also called *vṛṣala* – a little or contemptible man, a man of the lowest caste; a *śūdra*) are obviously familiar with the ritual of sacrificing animals to Kālī – they seem to know exactly what kind of ritual paraphernalia ought to be used to prepare the sacrifice. One could deduce that they were devout followers of Kālī. However, the goddess, seeing that they are about to commit a religious crime, kills them instantly. It is important to note here, that the goddess is free to kill the thieves, drink their blood and play with their heads with no repercussions. This is due to the fact that, not only is she “above the law” in a way but also, because she is punishing the criminals for plotting such an unholy offence as killing a helpless, high-born and innocent Brahmin.

The above fragment illustrates Kālī's character, but a more elaborate physical description can be found in the *Mahābhārata* (ca 4th c. BCE – 4th CE), book X, chapter 8. She appears during the war on the battle-field:

MhBh X. 8.64–66

They saw the Death-Night: red-eyed, anointed with blood, wearing red garlands, dressed in one red robe, carrying a noose, long-haired. [They saw her] laughing and, having caught men, horses and elephants with her noose, she departed carrying the different hairless spirits tied together. O sir! On other nights, great leaders saw her carrying the sleepers from their slumber and Droṇa's son killing them insistently.⁹

MhBh X. 8.78

Some heroes were killed from afar while others who rushed together were offered to the Death-Night.¹⁰

dāruṇaṁ yad brahma-bhūtasya sāksād brahmaṛṣi-sutasya nirvairasya sarva-bhūta-suhṛdaḥ
sūnāyām apy ananumatam ālambhanaṁ tad upalabhya brahma-tejasāti-durviṣaheṇa
dandahyamānena vapuṣā sahasoccacāṭa saiva devī bhadra-kālī ||17

bhṛṣam amarṣa-roṣāveśa-rabhasa-vilasita-bhru-kuṭi-viṭapa-kuṭila-damṣṭrāruneḥṣaṇātopāti-
bhayānaka-vadanā hantu-kāmevedam mahātṭa-hāsam ati-samrambheṇa vimuñcantī tata
utpatya pāpīyasām duṣṭānām tenaivāsinaḥ vivṛkṣa-śīrṣṇām galāt sravantam aṣṭg-āsavam
atuṣṇam saha gaṇeṇa nipīyāti-pāna-mada-vihvaloccaistarām sva-pārṣadaiḥ saha jagau
nanarta ca śirahāra ca śirah-kanduka-līlayā ||18

⁹ MhBh X.8 (translated by the author):

kālīm raktāsyānayanām raktamālyānulepanām |
raktāmaradharām ekām pāśahastām śikhaṇḍinīm || 64
dadṛśuḥ kālarātriṁ te smayamānām avasthitām |
narāśvakuñjarān pāśair baddhvā ghoraiḥ pratasthuṣīm |
harantīm vividhān pretān pāśabaddhān vimūrdhajān || 65
svapne suptān nayantīm tāṁ rātriṣv anyāsu māriṣa |
dadṛśuḥ yodhamukhyās te ghnantaṁ drauṇim ca nityadā || 66

¹⁰ MhBh X.8 (translated by the author):

punar utpatataḥ kāś cid dūrād api narottamān |
śūrān saṁpatataś cānyān kālarātryai nyavedayat || 78

This description of Kali does not give many details, but the image of a bloody harbinger of death is one that will persevere in all the later Sanskrit texts. She appears during battle and steals the warriors' souls in the night. Notable is the fact that she is battling on the side of the traditional antagonists of the *Mahābhārata*, the Kaurava's, as she is helping Droṇa's son, Aśvatthāman, slay enemy soldiers.

She also famously appears in the *Devīmāhātmya* (Glory of the Goddess), which is an independent text found within the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*, one of the eighteen Great Purāṇas (*mahāpurāṇa*) or Great Narratives. The *Devīmāhātmya* (ca 5th/6th c. CE) can be found in chapters 81–93 of the *purāṇa* and is, till this day, used by those who worship the Goddess around India. It is composed of 700 verses divided into thirteen chapters and tells the story of the Goddess' various victories over evil and mighty foes and gives a list of her different forms. One of these forms is Kālī, whose name “appears in the text fourteen times, all of the instances being in the third episode” (Coburn 2002: 109). Kālī as an emanation of the Goddess is described thus:

Carrying a many-colored skull-topped staff, wearing a
garland of human (skulls),
With a garment of tiger-skin, exceedingly frightening
with (her) dried-out skin;
With widely gaping mouth, terrifying with (her) lolling
tongue,
With sunken, reddened eyes, (and) a mouth that filled
the directions with roars (Coburn 2002: 109).¹¹

In this description we are once again barraged with a list of repulsive traits the goddess was supposed to have displayed.

Another important episode illustrating her person appears later on in the scripture, in chapter 7, when Kālī defeats the demons Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa (which gives her the epithet Cāmuṇḍā).

DM VII

15. Immediately upon seeing the entire army of the Asuras slain,
Caṇḍa rushed at the incredibly fearsome Kālī.
16. The great Asura enveloped the dread-eyed female with a horrendous great shower of arrows,
And Muṇḍa did the same with discuses hurled by the thousand.
17. This stream of discuses entering her mouth
Resembled a multitude of suns entering into the middle of a black cloud.

¹¹ DM VII
vicitrakhaṭvāṅgagharānasamālāvibhūṣaṇā |
dvīpicarmaparīdhānāśuṣkamāmsātibhairavā || 7.8
ativistāravadanājihvālanabhīṣaṇā |
nimagnāraktanayanā nādāpūritadinmukhā || 7.9

18. Then Kālī, her ugly teeth gleaming within her dreadful mouth,
Angrily cackled with terrible sounds.
19. Mounting her great lion, the Goddess ran at Caṇḍa,
And having seized him by the hair, she cut off his head with her
sword.
20. On seeing Caṇḍa slain, Muṇḍa rushed at her
She caused him to fall to the ground, wrathfully smitten with her
Sword.
21. On seeing Caṇḍa slain, and also the valorous Muṇḍa,
What was left of the assaulted army was overcome with fear,
And fled in all the directions.
22. Picking up the heads of Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, Kālī
Approached Caṇḍikā and spoke words mixed with loud and
Cruel laughter:
23. "Here, as a present from me to you, are Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, two
Beasts
Slain in the sacrifice of battle. ... (Coburn 1991: 62)¹²

Yet again, Kālī is fearsome in battle; moreover, she once more beheads her enemies. She is invincible as the thousands of arrows and discuses flung at her by the demons do her no harm; they merely enter her gaping maw and disappear as the sun does in a storm-cloud.

To sum up, the vision of Kālī painted in ancient Sanskrit texts is one of a cruel, repulsive warrior-woman¹³ who is ruthless not only in battle but also when standing guard over laws governing the world she defends (beheading the thieves

¹² DM VII

śaravarṣairmahābhīmairbhīmākṣīm tām mahāsuraḥ |
chādayāmāsa cakraiśca muṇḍaḥ kṣiptaiḥ sahasraśaḥ || 17
tani cakrāṇyanekāni viśamānāni tanmukham |
babhuryathārkabimbāni subahūni ghanodaram || 18
tato jahāsātirusā bhīmaṁ bhairavanādinī |
kālī karālavadanā durdarśadaśanojjvalā || 19
utthāya ca mahāsimhaṁ devī jaṇḍamdhāvata |
grhītvā cāśya keśeṣu śirastenāsinācchinat || 20
athamuṇḍo 'bhyadhāvattām dṛṣṭvā caṇḍaṁ nipātitaṁ |
tamapyapātayabhdamau sā khaṅgābhihataṁ ruṣā || 21
hataśeṣāmtatahsainyamdṛṣṭvācaṇḍamnipātitaṁ |
muṇḍaṁ ca sumahāvīryaṁ diśo bheje bhayāturam || 22
śiraścaṇḍasyakālī ca grhītvāmuṇḍameva ca |
prāha pracaṇḍāṭṭahāsamiścamabhyetya caṇḍakām || 23
mayāvatropahṛtaucaṇḍāmuṇḍaumahāpaśū |
yuddhayajñe svayaṁ śumbhamniśumbhaṁ ca haniṣyasi || 24

¹³ Another well-known episode of the *Devīmāhātmya* (DM 8.49–61) tells the story of Kālī defeating the demon Raktabīja: he was thought to be impossible to slay because he would duplicate himself whenever a drop of his blood would touch the Earth. Kālī managed to defeat him and his doppelgangers by drinking every last drop of his blood and swallowing all of his clones.

who *intended* to murder an innocent Brahmin). However, she is not a serene and distant custodian but, as we have seen:

a goddess who threatens stability and order. Although she may be said to serve order as a slayer of demons, more often than not she becomes so frenzied on the battlefield, usually becoming drunk on the blood of her victims, that she herself begins to destroy the world that she is supposed to protect. Thus, even in the service of the gods, she is ultimately dangerous [...] (Kinsley 1998:120).

Nowadays, Kālī is most revered in Bengal. One of the most famous Bengali poets, Rāprasād Sen (ca 1718–1775), according to popular legend, started a genre known as *śāktapadāvalī*, which is based on the praise of the goddess in one of her many forms. However, the topic of modern Kālī worship is a vast ocean, a whole branch of religious and Indian studies.¹⁴ Hence, having established the classical image of Kālī, let us move on to the way she is depicted in Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Kali Beheaded*.

Kālī décapitée or *Kali Beheaded*

The narrative is very short and tells the story of the goddess Kali,¹⁵ who once ruled in “Indra’s heaven” but the other gods, jealous of her purity and beauty, assaulted her, cut off her head and cast both her corpse and head down to hell. However, they quickly began to regret the deed and went to hell in order to restore the goddess. They found her pure head lying next to a body and joined the two. Unfortunately, the body belonged to a prostitute and had seemed white and pure only because of blood-loss. The hybrid Kali now roams the earth, burnt up by the lowly, earthly desires driving her impure body; while her divine head weeps for what it is being “forced” to do. “Wretched as a feverish woman unable to find cool water, she goes from village to village, from crossroads to crossroads, in search of the same mournful delights.” “Her tiny ankles dance frantically below the chiming anklets, but her eyes never stop weeping, her bitter mouth never kisses ...” She drinks heavily and readily gives herself away to the lowest of men: “slobbering idiots”, beggars, those who wash corpses, camel-drivers etc. “She became the seducer of children, the inciter of old men, the ruthless mistress

¹⁴ For more on the topic of modern Kālī worship in Bengal see: Rachel Fell McDermott, *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kali and Uma from Bengal*, Oxford University Press; Rachel Fell McDermott, Jeffrey John Kripal, *Encountering Kālī: in the margins, at the center, in the West*, University of California Press, 2003; Elizabeth U. Harding, *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar*, Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1998.

¹⁵ For ease, I will use the form Kali (*sans* diacritics) to denote the heroine of Yourcenar’s story and Kālī to denote the goddess as portrayed in Sanskrit literature.

of the young.” Kali despises the world and will not even warn an innocent child of a snake, poised to attack from between some rocks. She spends her time in the harlots’ quarter and in the most impure places: “she could be seen crouching at the edge of graveyards; her jaws cracked bones like the maws of a lioness.”

The end of the story¹⁶ brings Kali to a serene grove where she sees a wise man meditating. This “Master of Great Compassion” blesses her as she passes. The goddess tells him of her pathetic fate: “My immaculate head has been fixed to the body of infamy.” “I desire and do not desire, I suffer and yet I enjoy, I loathe living and am afraid to die.” The man goes on to console her, “we are all incomplete.” He tells her that she was just as entrapped in the eternal chain of things as a goddess in Indra’s heaven as she is being a harlot. He wonders whether she is close to reaching “that which has no shape,” which we can understand as the state of *mokṣa*.

There are many issues regarding this touching story that must be addressed. First, is the goddess portrayed in the narrative really Kālī? Certainly, when it comes to the way she was created, the answer must be ‘no’. Kālī was made by the gods in order to win an impossible battle; she did not live as a “lotus flower of perfection” in Indra’s heaven but appeared when times were dire or when she was called upon by the gods.

When we analyse her appearance, there are also discrepancies: Yourcenar’s Kali is beautiful, as her divine head still has all the features it had when she was in heaven. “Black Kali is beautiful and horrible. Her waist is so slender ... Her shoulders are round ...; her breasts are like buds about to burst; her hips sway like the trunk of a newly born elephant.” “Her large eyes are pure and sad.” It can be easily ascertained, that this is nothing like what the Sanskrit Kālī looked like, with her lolling tongue, red eyes and dried-out skin.¹⁷

Character wise, the differences between Kālī shown in Yourcenar’s story and in the Sanskrit texts are ever starker. From what we have thus far established, Kālī was a ruthless killer (*kāla* can also mean death) who took immense pleasure not only in battling but also in the very act of slaying a human being. She eagerly beheaded her victims and drank their blood. She played sport with their heads. She laughed, while wreaking havoc and slaughter, whereas Yourcenar writes of her Kali that, “her lips have never smiled”. Kālī in Sanskrit mythology was an extremely *active* persona, her energy sometimes ripping away at the fabric of the universe. Yourcenar’s Kali is most definitely passive; whatever she does is

¹⁶ *À propos* – in the Postscript of Oriental tales Yourcenar writes: “Only the ending of ‘Kali Beheaded’ was rewritten, to better emphasize certain metaphysical concepts from which this legend is inseparable, and without which, told in a Western manner, it is nothing but a vague erotic tale placed in an Indian setting.”

¹⁷ It should be noted here that much in the text attests that Yourcenar was familiar with Indian aesthetic, *vide*: slim-waisted Kali’s amble is like that of an elephant, her head, floating in a pool in hell, is a lotus while her hair is the flower’s roots etc. These comparisons can be found abundantly in classical Sanskrit poetry.

forced upon her by the desires of her body and is not of her own choice. While Kālī is a mistress of her fate, Kali is a slave of providence, hopelessly roaming the Earth, bemoaning her lost life. Only in the end of the story does she gain some faith that it was not all for naught. Also, we can hardly imagine Kali as a merciless warrior bearing various weapons and guarding over the laws governing the universe, as she hardly seems able to grasp her own situation. She is the embodiment of the eternal conflict between the Apollonian and Dionysian, of *Körper* and *Geist*. Of course, this is not an attempt to criticise her attitude in any way, after all, her only crime was being too perfect and arousing jealousy in the hearts of the other gods. I simply wish to underline the differences found between the two depictions.

It is interesting how Joan Howard sees Kali's existence: "It is easy enough to predict what would happen to this being if the conflicts that are she were [sic] resolved in the sacrificial way. Kali would cease to roam the plains from Benares to Kapilavastu, from Bangalore to Srinagar, in search of yet another person to seduce. She would stay home where the woman belongs. She would forgo her *jouis-sance*, become chaste. Every carnal call would go unheeded. She would submit, in other words, to the reign of the sovereign head" (Howard 1992:106).¹⁸

The second question that begs to be asked is: since it was obviously not the classic depiction of Kālī that inspired the author, did Yourcenar actually base her story on a genuine Indian myth or is the narrative all a figment of her imagination? After all, transposed heads is a theme found quite often in all classical literature, not only in Sanskrit.¹⁹ However, this specific story of two women of different social strata swapping heads is found in one, very vast, Indian corpus: the *Reṇukā* myth.

¹⁸ I must disagree with this quite judgemental and radical interpretation of the tale, as it is glaringly obvious that Kali does not really want this newfound "freedom". She weeps and bemoans the state she is in and does not see it as a great opportunity to finally throw her chastity out of the window and indulge in her newfound sexuality. She is most definitely a tragic heroine. However, Howard's interpretation raises an interesting point: would Kali really be happy if she were to return to the golden cage that is Indra's heaven? Would she miss the freedom that she had experienced, roaming the Earth as she pleases? It seems that the only real solution to her tragic conundrum is, verily, *mokṣa*.

¹⁹ In Sanskrit this theme is exceptionally common. The most notable example is that of the god Ganeśa who was 'created' when his father Śiva beheads him in fury. When Ganeśa's mother and Śiva's consort, Pārvatī, sees this she forces her husband to bring the child back to life. Śiva does this by attaching the first head he finds, that of an elephant, to the boy's body. Another very important myth is that found in the *Vetālapañcaviṃśatikā* of Somadeva (XI C.E), first translated into English by Sir Richard F. Burton in 1870 as *King Vikram and the Vampire*. There, the wily king Vikram has to keep a flesh-eating vampire at bay by telling him stories over the course of twenty-five nights. Story nine: *Showing That a Man's Wife Belongs Not to His Body but to his Head* is a tale of a woman, her husband and his brother. The men's heads are transposed and a conundrum arises as to which of the 'new' men is the woman's true husband. This tale reached Europe thanks to Thomas Mann's *Die vertauschten Köpfe, Eine Indische Legende (The Transposed Heads, an Indian Legend)*.

Transposed Heads

The Reṇukā/ Māriyamman myth is a widely known story but it is most popular in southern India, especially in the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. It originated in the *Mahābhārata* (III.116.1–18) in which the heroine, Reṇukā, is beheaded by her son when she is exposed as having lost her purity (by looking at a man with lust). When her husband, the hot-tempered sage Jamadagni, found out about her indiscretion, he fell into a rage and ordered their sons one by one to kill Reṇukā. Only the fifth, youngest son, Rāma heeded his father's order. The boy took his mother outside and cut off her head. After a while, Jamadagni's anger subsided and he granted his son a boon for carrying out the order. Rāma decided that he wanted his mother to return from the dead and to be peerless in battle. These wishes were granted.

In south India, the myth was developed and transformed and is now locally used to explain the origin of the goddess of smallpox, Māriyamman. The story goes that Reṇukā/ Māriyamman was the mother of Paraśurāmā, one of Viṣṇu's incarnations, and the sage Jamadagni was her husband. She was a pure and beautiful woman, who had supernatural powers that depended on whether she stayed untainted. One day, she was carrying home some water by rolling it up into a ball above her head. She saw a group of heavenly minstrels (*gandharva*) and lust grew in her heart. This earthly desire immediately obliterated her magic and the ball of water burst, soaking her. Of course, when she got home, her husband noticed that she was wet and at once understood her crime so, enraged, he ordered his son to cut off her head. Paraśurāmā carried out the cruel sentence but, repenting, begged Jamadagni to bring her back to life. Having learnt the necessary spell from his father, Paraśurāmā went to the execution ground and put his mother's head on a body he found there. As it turned out, the body was that of a low caste washerwoman but, kindly, he also restored the washerwoman's head on his mother's divine body. "The woman with the Brahman head and Pariah body was afterwards worshipped as Māriyammā; while the woman with the Pariah head and Brahman body was worshipped as the goddess Yellammā" (Rajagopal 2007: 33).

One cannot deny that there are many similarities between the Māriyamman myth and the narrative of *Kali Beheaded*, the main parallel being the transposition of heads that occurs between the castes. Moreover, Wendy Doniger, analyzing this myth, made a point that is also important when interpreting Marguerite Yourcenar's tale. "Since higher castes often regard lower caste women as erotic, and her body ends up lower caste, we might assume that it is the sight of her eroticism. . . . And her impure bottom half, the half that lusts for the demigod, is the *human* woman, the denied woman, as polluting and despised as the Outcaste." (Doniger 1999: 208) This statement is most certainly true for Yourcenar's Kali also; she is not only a social Pariah because of the impure body she posses-

ses but also because she lets her desires propel her with all abandon. Kali becomes an unstoppable seductress only when her divinely-pure head is attached to the “impure bottom half”.

What is interesting and extremely relevant in this case is that this myth was published in French in the 18th century by the botanist and explorer, Pierre Sonnerat. In his *Voyage aux Indes orientales et à la Chine, fait depuis 1774 jusqu’à 1781* (1782), he retold an oral rendition of the story that he had heard in Tamil Nadu. His version is very similar to the one told above.²⁰ Therefore, taking into consideration Yourcenar’s love for the Orient from a very young age and the similarities that can be found between the south Indian myth and *Kali Beheaded*, I believe it can be assumed that Marguerite Yourcenar read Sonnerat’s travelogue and was inspired by this particular episode.²¹ Another fact, attesting to the truth of this claim, is a quote from *Voyage aux Indes orientales* translated into English by Wendy Doniger: “... a monstrous assemblage, which gave this woman the virtues of a goddess and the vices of an unfortunate wretch. The goddess, having become impure through the mix, was chased out of her house and committed all sorts of cruelties.” (Doniger 1999: 206). While this quote has nothing to do with Kālī, it can be explicitly used to describe the fate of Yourcenar’s Kali. Moreover, traditionally the goddess Māriyamman is not known for carrying out any “cruelties” while Kali was definitely cruel and spiteful.

To recapitulate, Kālī depicted in ancient Sanskrit literature is a fearsome woman.

She is always black or dark, is usually naked, and has long, dishevelled hair. She is adorned with severed arms as a girdle, freshly cut heads as a necklace, children’s corpses as earrings, and serpents as bracelets. She has long, sharp fangs, is often depicted as having clawlike hands with long nails, and is often said to have blood smeared on her lips” (Kinsley 1998: 116).

²⁰ It was also recorded from an oral account by Henry Whitehead between the years 1883 and 1899. Whitehead takes particular interest in the myth and interprets it thus: “The story is an interesting one, because it probably describes the fusion of the Aryan and Dravidian cults in the days when the Aryans first found their way into South India. A Pariah body with a Brāhman head is an apt description of the cult of Śiva, while a Pariah head with a Brāhman body might well describe some of the cult of the ancient Dravidian deities, modified by Brāhman ideas and influences” (Whitehead 1921: 116). There are also modern-day oral accounts of the myth, still in a similar form (see Voorthuizen: 2004).

²¹ It must be mentioned that *Voyage aux Indes orientales* may have been the inspiration behind Goethe’s so-called *Paria-Legende*, a trilogy of three poems: *Das Paria Gebet* (*The Prayer of the Pariah*), *Legende* (*The Legend*) and *Dank des Paria* (*Thanks of the Pariah*) composed in 1821 as well as *Der Gott und die Bajadere* (*God and the Bayadere*). However, the heroine portrayed by Goethe lacks the evil streak that Yourcenar’s Kali clearly has; the poet gives a lyrical and interesting version of the legend describing the creation of the small-pox goddess. I do not negate the fact that Yourcenar might have known Goethe’s work but I firmly believe that she was primarily influenced by Sonnerat, as is attested by the quote given from Wendy Doniger’s translation of the travelogue.

She loves to slaughter, fight, drink, and amuse herself with her companions. In a way, she is making the most of her existence with a reckless joy that can border on madness. She is strong and passionate and, most definitely, a divine figure worth not only reverence but also fear.

Kali depicted in Marguerite Yourcenar's *Kali Beheaded*, on the other hand, is a hopeless figure, her "body is a war zone where the Same and Other collide in all their violent fury" (Howard 1992: 106). She was thrown into her new life by chance, through the whim of others. She doesn't control what happens with her, she is driven only by her bodily needs, not her spiritual ones.

There can be no doubt that Yourcenar was not inspired by any genuine Kālī myths when writing *Kali Beheaded*. She was almost certainly influenced by an account she read in Pierre Sonnerat's *Voyage aux Indes orientales*. And, although the myth that most likely interested her had been processed and transformed on its journey through language and cultural barriers, it is evident that much of what we can find in Sonnerat's version rings true with the original versions of the myth (having compared it to other renditions of the oral tale recorded by both European and Indian scholars). Therefore, I believe we can claim that Marguerite Yourcenar was indirectly influenced by the local South Indian legend of the goddess Māriammaṅ when writing *Kālī décapitée*.²²

What remains to be done is to attempt to uncover the message conveyed by Yourcenar.²³ As Wendy Doniger points out, "the theme of the human with the wrong head is incredibly malleable. It is always *about* much the same thing – death, sex, disorder, dichotomy, the interruption of the divine or animal into human life – but what it says about what it is about is quite different in each instance. *Something* is cut away from something else. But what is that something?" (Doniger 1999: 226) Marguerite Yourcenar was definitely a woman who chose a demanding life for herself in the patriarchal world of literature and I believe that *Kali Beheaded*, can be seen as a parallel of that struggle – the gods were jealous of Kali and robbed her of her elevated position in heaven. In other words, it may be interpreted that she was killed because it was impossible for a woman to occupy such a lofty place in the pantheon. What is more, Yourcenar's sexual

²² An interesting question to pose would be: since Yourcenar knew the traditional Kālī images and descriptions and she must have realised that the goddess depicted in Sonnerat's travelogue was not connected to Kālī in any way, why did she choose then to combine the two? In other words, why did she choose to call her heroine Kali, if she knew there was no association between the Indian goddess Kālī and her protagonist? I believe that she chose a name that would instantly be recognisable to the Western reader as Indian. Moreover, Kālī has always been the most 'exotic' and 'attractive' Indian divinity. It so happens that in *Die vertauschten Köpfe* Thomas Mann also decides to change the female catalyst of the tale from the goddess Pārvaṭī (found in the traditional Indian telling of the legend) to, *nomen omen*, Kālī.

²³ Joan Howard suggests that, "perhaps this tale implies, it is they who have suffered most violently at the innermost core of their selves ... that hold the key to transformation (Howard 1992: 107).

orientation cannot be ignored in the analysis of the tale, as one may imagine the confusion that accompanied her emotional and physical coming of age in the conservative setting of aristocratic France at the beginning of the 20th century (Yourcenar was just 25 when she first published the tale). This inner turmoil may have been embodied in the words “I desire and do not desire, I suffer and yet I enjoy, I loathe living and am afraid to die.”

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Oblicze bogini Kali w opowieści Marguerite Yourcenar *Kali, której ucięto głowę*

STRESZCZENIE

Bogini Kali (*Kālī*) bardzo często staje się ofiarą stereotypów wywodzących się z najstarszych tekstów sanskryckich. Przedstawiana jest jako bezwzględna wojowniczką, która pojawia się podczas bitwy i chroni wszechświat przed najbardziej niebezpiecznymi demonami. W tekstach Bhagawatapurany (*Bhāgavatapurāna*), Mahabharaty (*Mahābhārata*) i Dewimahatmji (*Devimāhātmya*) Kali pokazuje swój niezłomny charakter – jest bezwzględna i porywczą. Marguerite Yourcenar (1903–1987) zdecydowała się uczynić Kali bohaterką powieści *Kali, której ucięto głowę*. Jednakże bohaterka Yourcenar w niczym nie przypomina groźnej bogini, jaka pojawia się w tekstach sanskryckich.

Celem artykułu jest wyłonienie indyjskich mitów i legend, które mogły zainspirować autorkę (jeżeli w ogóle inspirowała się ona Indiami). Wnioski są zaskakujące, Yourcenar bowiem najprawdopodobniej inspirację czerpała z ludowego mitu pochodzącego z Indii południowych, dotyczącego bogini ospy wietrznej Mariyamman (*Māriyamman*). Legenda o Mariyamman z kolei została opublikowana przez podróżnika Pierre'a Sonnerata w *Voyage aux Indes orientales et à la Chine, fait depuis 1774 jusqu'à 1781* (1782). Podobieństwo charakterów pomiędzy boginią ospy i Kali stworzoną przez Yourcenar jest niezaprzeczalne, jednak najważniejsza jest historia o ich narodzinach – obie kobiety *powstały*, gdy przypadkowo połączono „czystą” głowę kobiety z najwyższej kasty ze zbrukanym ciałem kobiety z kasty najniższej. Wynika z tego, że Yourcenar nie czerpała z oryginalnych, sanskryckich mitów dotyczących Kali, lecz przeniosła miejscowy mit o Mariyamman na znaną postać bogini śmierci.

²⁴ Translated into Polish by Krystyna Dolatowska: Marguerite Yourcenar, 1988, *Opowieści wschodnie*, Warszawa.

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