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Two Thousand Words: Aphrodite and Kali Reimagined

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Two Thousand Words:
Aphrodite and Kali Reimagined

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Abstract

Kali and Aphrodite are archetypal goddess images that have stood the test of time because of their universal symbolism. Each represents aspects of human nature and of life itself. Although their representations may be particular to their cultural origins, the symbolic significance of these two goddesses can be recognized universally. For example, Aphrodite is the ancient Greek goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality. In artistic renderings of her myth, she is often depicted in the form of a beautiful young woman rising from the sea at her birth or bathing near water. On the other hand, Kali is a Hindu warrior goddess of destruction, but also one of rebirth. She is fierce, yet also seen as a loving mother to her devotees. In statues and paintings she is often depicted as a nude woman wearing a necklace of decapitated heads, and a skirt of human arms. Kali has inky-black or deep blue skin and multiple arms, which carry different symbolic items, such as a sword and trident. This paper serves as an introduction to my Senior Project, which will be artistic renderings of Aphrodite as she might appear in Hindu culture and Kali as she might appear in ancient Greek culture. In other words, Aphrodite will be depicted as a Hindu goddess, and Kali will be depicted as a goddess of the ancient Greek Pantheon. My investigation of the symbolic meaning and cultural translation of these two feminine archetypes will show that what is most particular is most universal.

Two Thousand Words: Aphrodite and Kali Reimagined

“A picture is worth a thousand words.”

(American Proverb)

Introduction

Love, beauty, sexuality, wrath, life, and death: these are all words that describe parts of the human experience on a universal scale. These words, along with a plethora of others, such as joy and despair, are used to describe feelings and experiences that most people participate in during their lifetimes across the boundaries of different cultures, religions and time periods. These words describe intangible emotions, instincts and experiences; thus, as a natural response, humans have worshiped divinities that often are believed to be true embodiments of these qualities. Sometimes symbolic images are used to help create a perceivable image in the mind. Such divinities and myths surrounding the sacred or supernatural help explain concepts like love, life, or death.

Additionally, almost all cultures since the dawn of human history have shared in artistic expression, putting these feelings and experiences into visual representations through symbolism (Apostolos-Cappadona 1:493). It makes sense, then, that artistic symbolism is used to give life to the divine. Carl Jung, in *The Undiscovered Self*, points out that artistic expression is a voice for human spirit. “Great art till now has always derived its fruitfulness from myth, an unconscious process of symbolization which continues through the ages and, as the primordial manifestation of the human spirit, will continue to be the root of all creation in the future” (59). In other words, by making art, the human spirit is able to communicate that which the conscious mind can only begin to grasp. People have not always had a written language, and for much of history, literacy was not common. Mediums such as paintings, mosaics, and sculptures, then

become a visual language, which can communicate intricate thoughts, feelings and expressions where words may fail to articulate. A perfect example of explaining the marriage of religion and art is stated in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, “Images (as well as song, dance, verse, and music) are not merely incidental to religion, but often the very medium in which belief takes shape” (Morgan 8:xi).

Gods and Goddesses are also reflections of the human experience. To understand what a particular deity represents and the manner in which the deity is represented is to understand what the human experience is, more so, when you account for that deity’s culture. Kali and Aphrodite are archetypal goddess images that have stood the test of time because of their universal symbolism. They have been adopted by different cultures and represented through art in a fairly consistent manner. Each represents aspects of human nature and of life itself. Although their representations may be particular to their cultural origins, the symbolic significance of these two goddesses can be recognized universally. Aphrodite is the ancient Greek goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality, and Kali is a Hindu warrior goddess of destruction and detachment, but also one of time and rebirth.

This paper serves as an introduction to my Senior Project, which offers artistic renderings of Aphrodite as she might appear in Hindu culture and Kali as she might appear in ancient Greek culture. In other words, Aphrodite will be depicted as a Hindu goddess, and Kali will be depicted as a goddess of the Greek Pantheon. My investigation of the symbolic meaning and cultural translation of these two feminine archetypes will show that what is most particular is most universal. Furthermore, by creating art, I am applying what I have learned about Aphrodite and Kali by *experiencing the process* of communicating symbolism through art. I am experiencing the full beauty of the divine by becoming part of the tradition. While what makes

art “good” is subjective, I feel I am able to illustrate what these goddesses represent through visual symbolism, finding cross-cultural and timeless connections. As an introduction to these artworks, I will give a concise history of who Aphrodite and Kali are and how they are seen in their respective cultures. I will then finish by providing details of how I will represent them in art in their “new” contexts.

The Goddesses: Their History and Symbols in their Respective Cultures

Aphrodite

Aphrodite’s name means “foam-risen,” which is a reference to her birth from the sea, where she rose up in the form of a beautiful woman, often depicted on a scallop shell. In addition to being the goddess of love and sexuality, she is also the goddess of beauty, seafarers, and fertility. The first mention of her was around 700 BCE by the poet Hesiod, although historians feel that she has older roots from the East (Pirenne-Delforge 1:407-409; Kondoleon). She is often depicted as either partially or fully nude, and her symbols include doves, apples, mirrors, roses, and the planet Venus. The goddess Venus, Aphrodite’s Roman counterpart, is often identified as the same goddess with a different name. Some aspects of Venus were amplified in Rome, whereas other aspects of the goddess were played down. For example, Venus took the role of a more virtuous figure, and had connections with the wives of Emperors. Her figure was usually displayed in domestic settings such as gardens (Kondoleon). Like her Greek counterpart, she was also depicted as a very beautiful young woman with connotations of physical love. Roman Venus was associated with purple, diamonds, gold, mixture of roses and myrtle, doves, and sparrows. Venus is often pictured with her son Cupid, the Roman counterpart to Eros (Kondoleon).

As noted above, Aphrodite's parentage is most often linked to the account by the ancient Greek poet, Hesiod. Kronos castrated his father, Uranus (the sky), and tossed the severed genitals into the sea, which produced white foam where Aphrodite was formed (Pirenne-Delforge 1:407). This points to the origin of her name because the word *aphros* means foam. However, in an account by Homer, she is the daughter of Zeus and Dione and therefore, "under the paternal authority of Zeus" (Pirenne-Delforge 1:407). She is married off to the ugly god, Hephaestus, but has many affairs with gods and mortals alike. Through her beauty and charm, any man who met her would fall in love. Her more famous children include Eros by Ares, and Aeneas and Adonis by the mortal Anchises ("Aphrodite").

Aphrodite was revered throughout the ancient world, but had major cults and devotees in Corinth, Cyprus, and Cythera (Kondoleon). There would also be offerings of flowers, incense and sometimes animals to Aphrodite. It is said that she had favor with those who properly worshiped her, but, being self-absorbed and jealous, she could be wrathful towards those who were not loyal. While her original cults in Greece and Rome eventually died out, especially with the rise of Christianity, Aphrodite and Venus have been revisited throughout the ages as symbols of love, beauty, and sexuality (Kondoleon). Most recently, she has had a great re-emergence as an influential goddess in some neo-pagan traditions, such as Wicca (Pike 10:6470).

Kali

At first glance, to a western eye that is unfamiliar with Hindu culture, Kali might appear to look like more of a demon than a goddess. Like many deities, her iconography has evolved over time to fit the perception of the culture, but the majority of the symbols remain the same. Dating back to the year 600 A.D., Kali has always been associated with battle, death, and the outer edges of society (McDermott and Kripal 24). In one of her most popular myths, Kali

springs from the forehead of the goddess Durga during battle with the demon Raktabija. “During the struggle a new demon emerges from each drop of Raktabija’s blood as it hits the ground; to prevent this, Kali laps up the blood before it can reach the ground” (Doniger). Another popular story of Kali’s “birth” is connected with the goddess Parvati. Originally dark in complexion, Parvati is granted her wish to have light skin; the dark skin she sheds becomes her fierce nature personified as Kali (McDermott and Kripal 26).

Kali is consistently described and depicted in art with disheveled hair, three eyes, sharp teeth with her tongue lolling, and she is adorned in various human body parts. She holds a decapitated head in one of her many hands, with its blood dripping into a bowl that she holds below it. Her other hands often brandish weaponry such as a sword and a trident with fresh blood dripping from them. Kali’s husband Shiva is frequently depicted to be unconscious or dead beneath her feet because he stopped her from destroying the world when she was drunk on blood. When Shiva saw that Kali was on the rampage, he decided to “lay down on the battlefield like a corpse, so that when she danced on his body she would stop, recognizing him as her husband” (McDermott and Kripal 36).

Perhaps this doesn’t sound like the most relatable figure, but in fact, Kali is the representation of both destruction, and rebirth. As the fierce aspect of the supreme goddess, Devi, her name roughly translates to mean “She who is Death” (Doniger). Moreover, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* points out that her name comes from “the feminine form of kala, ‘time-doomsday-death’,” which associates her with the concept of time itself (Doniger). Her devotees recognize that Kali, like time, is essentially what brings everything into existence, but also takes it away. She holds an exalted place in Hindu culture, and reminds the viewer that everything is temporary. She symbolizes that we must learn to destroy one negative aspect of ourselves in

order to allow a better part of us to blossom. In *Encountering Kali*, Rachel McDermott writes, “She is here not only the symbol of death but the symbol of triumph over death” (31). I think of Kali as a natural wildfire, which scorches the Earth, and brings destruction in its path, but in turn clears the way for fresh growth to take its place.

A New Look

Having given a basic introduction to these two goddesses and their histories, I will now introduce them to their new cultures. The way I am approaching this great task is to think of a time before the Internet, when ideas were spread more by word of mouth or through written documentation. My intentions are to respectfully examine the symbolism behind these two strong archetypes, and represent them through new lens of their new cultures to show how Aphrodite and Kali would be represented after being assimilated. In other words, I want to look at the goddesses and their symbolism if their myths had been cross-pollinated into each other’s cultures. This is common with other deities throughout history; for example, Aphrodite has connections with goddesses from the east such as Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. Further, the Hindu god Kama, to whom I will refer in Aphrodite’s new Hindu appearance, is actually considered to have connections with the Greek’s Eros. These examples are due to certain traditions and stories traveling from one culture to another and being adopted into their new setting.

I have created the images using soft pastels on watercolor paper. I chose this medium because I am most familiar with it, and I have the ability to create images as I have pictured them. I recognize that this is my own interpretation, but with careful study I feel my representations will fully encompass the meaning that Aphrodite and Kali represent in a new light, showing that certain aspects of the human experience may be symbolized either closely or differently, but ultimately are universal in their core function.

Hindu Aphrodite

To reiterate, Aphrodite is the goddess of love, beauty and sexuality, and her most common symbols include water, shells, flowers (particularly the rose), and birds such as the dove and swan. She is portrayed as a beautiful young woman who is often partially or fully nude, especially in her Greek form. When approaching her with a new lens, I investigated how the Hindus already approach symbolizing love, beauty and sexuality. First I wanted to see if there was a Hindu equivalent, which there isn't— at least not in a single goddess form. In the image of Aphrodite I have incorporated the classic style of giving her multiple sets of arms, which is common in Hindu iconography, for they are a representation of a divinity's transcendency. Additionally, she is the center of the piece as she is pictured on her own and not with a consort, as is traditional for Hindu goddesses (Kramrisch 7:4323). Aphrodite still remains depicted as a beautiful young woman, with a fair complexion but is Indian in appearance, as she has now become a new incarnation of the goddess Maha-Devi, "the omnipresent female deity of Hinduism, but she appears in many guises and has many names according to her various roles" (Hall 177). Similar to Greek iconography, deities are identified in Hindu art according to the symbols they hold or are surrounded with.

Hindu Aphrodite is sitting by water on a large scallop shell to reference her birth story and is also holding a conch shell. In both Greek and Indian culture, shells and water are considered symbolic of female sexuality, and the source of life (Hall 111). I have replaced the rose with the lotus because roses do not have the same amount of symbolic meaning in India. However, the lotus makes the perfect substitution because it is a symbol of beauty, and most Hindu female deities "nearly always have a lotus among their numerous attributes" (Hall 150). Like in Greek Iconography, Hindu Aphrodite feigns a small amount of modesty with one of her

left hands, but also bestows blessings with another in a hand gesture known as *varada-mudra*: an open palm with the fingers and thumb facing downward (Hall 132).

While researching love deities and symbolism in Hinduism, I also found information on the god Kama, also known as Kamadeva, who is sometimes known as the Hindu Eros and most often related to sexual love, like Aphrodite. “The name of the god and the sensuality he represents are familiar to most people. Indeed, the most common word for passion/lust/desire in Hindi is *kām*, the shortened form of the Sanskrit *kāma*” (Benton 3). Despite there being limited iconographic images of him, he is most often associated with parrots (which are seen as love birds that also have his sacred colors), sugarcane bow and five flower arrows. His colors are green and red, because “red being the color of love’s passion, and green, that of fertility...the two in one form symbolized the union of male and female principles” (Jain). Kama is also associated with *apsarases*, who are beautiful nymphs who are described as wearing form-fitting, translucent robes on their curvy bodies with long, flowing hair and are irresistible to men (Benton 135). This information is important in my representation of Aphrodite, because I made references to Kama and the *apsarases* in the pastel as a way to communicate similar feelings and ideas in her new iconography.

Hindu Aphrodite reflects my interpretation of the *apsarases* through her dress and hairstyle, and she holds a bow with flower arrows as reference to Kama. Additionally, thoughts of the love god are to be conjured in the mind with the use of reds and greens, including a pair of parrots, in the image. The end product is a new Aphrodite who honors both her Greek origins and the symbolism of her new home.

Greek Kali

Kali also has no exact replica in Greek mythology, but many of the symbols do translate. Being a fierce warrior goddess that is representative of time, death and rebirth, I have investigated symbolism throughout Greek myths. First, I have chosen to represent Kali standing in a strong pose that is reminiscent of representations of Athena, goddess of warfare. Greek Kali is holding a sword in one hand, a shield in the other, and she is wearing a Greek hoplite helmet on her head. On the helmet, the third eye is seen as reference to her Hindu roots, and she still remains blue in color. Unlike Athena, Kali has more of a chaotic energy and is connected with sexuality, so she is partially clothed, which is common in Greek art when representing deities that possess the same qualities (Atsma). Kali is wearing a red cloak representing blood (a life-giving source in both cultures). The cloak is fastened with a metal collar, showing images of three faces. The faces represent the necklace of heads Kali wears in the Hindu tradition, and the gorgon's head Athena wears on her breastplate. Moreover, these three faces are to connect this incarnation of Kali to the Greek goddess Hecate, who is often represented with three heads or bodies (Atsma).

Hecate is similar to Kali because she is a powerful goddess who can bestow blessings or withhold them from the unworthy (Atsma; Bell 219). The three faces of Hecate are representations of crossroads, and phases of the moon in its cyclical rebirth and death (Hall 187). Residing in Hades, Hecate is frequently represented holding two torches to light her way in the dark underworld. Being the perfect setting for Greek Kali, I have two torches set in the background to help illuminate and identify her new home (Hall 187).

The Furies (alternatively the Erynies) also reside in Hades when not punishing evildoers. The Furies were usually shown as “ugly, winged women with hair, arms and waists entwined

with poisonous serpents. They wielded whips and were clothed either in the long black robes of mourners, or the short-length skirts and boots of huntress- maidens” (Atsma). Like the Furies will wear a dark huntress skirt, and possess dark wings. On Kali’s shield is the image of a snake biting its tail known as Ouroboros, which is a representation of “eternity and often associated with gods and emblems that personify time” (Batisitni 10). Furthermore, snakes are used cross-culturally as symbols of rebirth, due to the shedding of their skin (Hall 43).

A lolling tongue is something I didn’t expect to find in Greek culture, until I realized that it is often depicted on Gorgons, or demon like figures such as Medusa (Atsma). Images such as these were used as symbols of protection as they were thought to ward off evil spirits (Hall 139). While it is often noted that Kali’s facial expression is supposedly in response to the surprise of trampling her husband Shiva, I felt it was appropriate to give Kali the same aggressive appearance as the Gorgons in my artwork. The final product is the Greek Kali that holds the symbolism of time, death and rebirth in a context that worshipers of the Greek Pantheon would understand and relate to.

Conclusion

In representing these images with a new lens, I have attempted to show that the archetypal images of Aphrodite and Kali are universal in the human experiences they portray, and can be adopted into new cultures by incorporating that culture’s symbolism. This project is a culmination of my work for my degree in Humanities and Cultural Studies (HCS). The Dominican University website states that students majoring in HCS develop “analysis, synthesis, creative thinking and communication skills.” Furthermore, the HCS homepage explains that the “study of the human condition and cultural diversity” by the means of multiple topics including, but not limited to, art, art history, history, and literature will give students “the ability to relate to

multiple world views and diverse cultural experiences.” I have achieved this goal through my research and artwork by investigating these goddesses, and cross-examining the symbolism and traditions of their cultures. While I learned a great deal through my research, I was ultimately able to meet the essence of Aphrodite and Kali through the process of creating their reimagined images by exploring and meditating on their symbolism as I drew. I present these images as a representation of my experience and education in the Humanities and Cultural Studies. If the American proverb that “a picture is worth a thousand words” is accurate, then the images that follow are worth at least two thousand.

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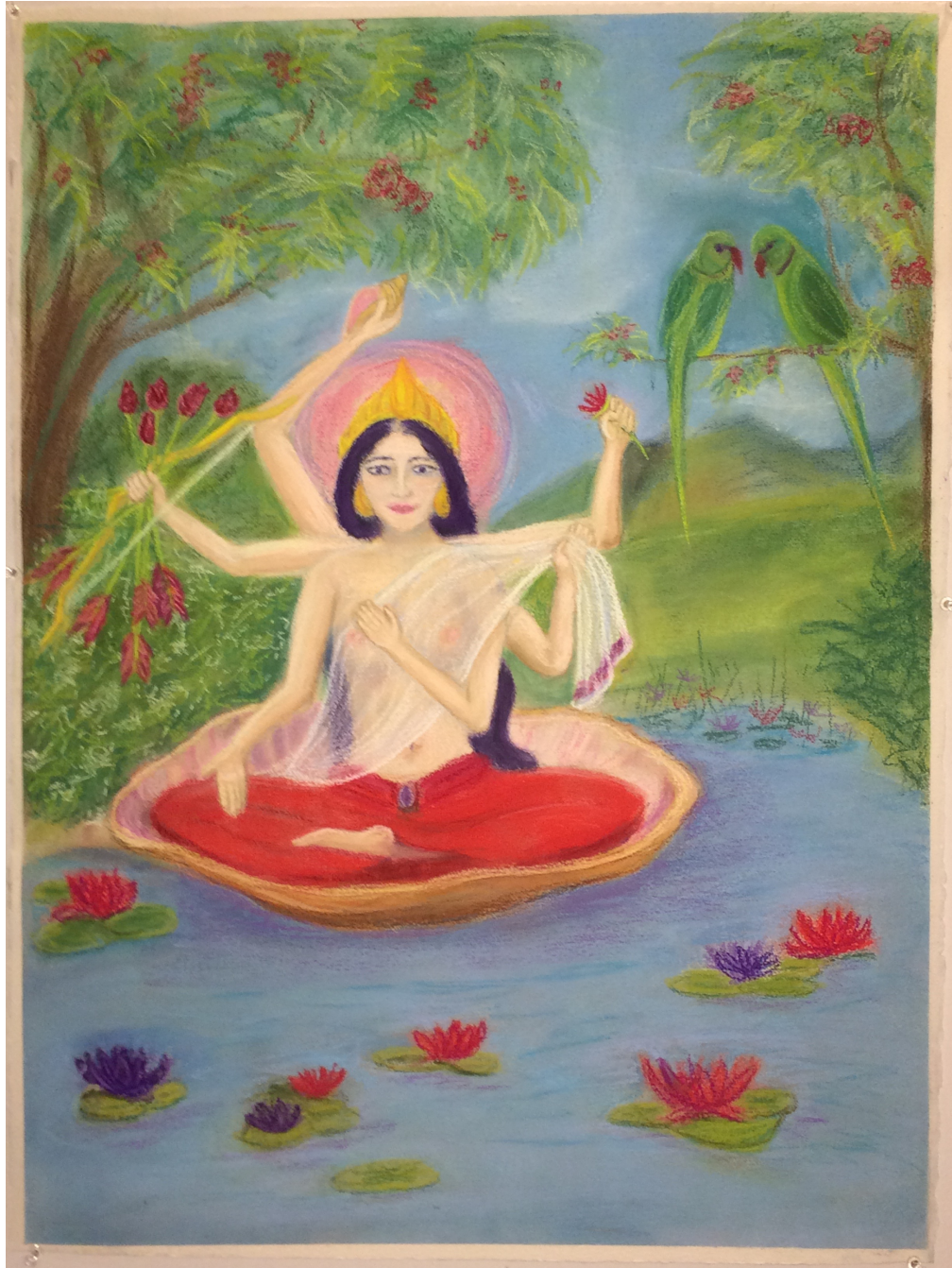
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Hindu Aphrodite (2016)

Soft Pastel on Watercolor Paper

22 x 30 inches



Greek Kali (2016)

Soft Pastel on Watercolor Paper

22 x 30 inches

