

Dhūmāvātī, Kālī, Shodashī: Searching for Three Faces of the Sacred Feminine

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The essay provides an artistic elaboration of the meditative experience of energies and forms of selected Mahāvidyās – ten aspects of Adi Parashakti, sacred feminine energy according to the Indian tradition. Textual descriptions are complemented by visual expressions realized by the author herself.

1 Introduction

Six years ago, the Goddesses came into my life. Over the past six years I have painted and drawn them (Fig. 1). Certainly, they were already at the heart of the subject of my Yoga graduation thesis, but the scope of this work quickly expanded over this scholarly frame.



Fig. 1. Kālī Clad in Space » mixed techniques

I had to learn to recognize their presence, to feel their energy, to open myself to their meaning. It came to me rather spontaneously and effortlessly; gradually everything I engaged in was granted a new dimension. Kālī the Black was the first to come to me. I had barely begun the work on Kālī's image, when Dhūmāvātī, Goddess of the smoke and the dissolution, stood out. Then, I returned to Kālī, before beginning the work on Shodashī, the everlasting sixteen-year-old beauty.

In the tantric transmission and spirituality, Kālī, Dhūmāvātī and Shodashī are part of a group of ten Goddesses known as the *Mahāvidyā*, "Ten Great Knowledges", who are manifestations of *Mahādevī*, the "Great Goddess". Each of these ten



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forms represents a special approach to spiritual awakening and Self-realization. However, the *Mahāvidyās* show us not only the way to knowledge, but they are knowledge, and wisdom themselves through the hidden messages of their bodies, their attributes, and appearances.

Each Goddess embodies herself on one side in a *mantra*, her sound form, on the other side in a *yantra*, her geometrical form. For the devotees, these representations are the Goddess herself and are situated on a more subtle level than the anthropomorphic representation. However, the meditation or the pondering over the body of the Goddess and her attributes is one of the first ways to enter in connection with the deity. David Frawley remarks (1996, 90): "If we meditate upon strongly enough, the form will come alive and teach us, and reveal the deeper aspects of its reality."

Kālī and Dhūmāvātī are connected with all that is heat and destruction: to fire (light), lightning, Sun. Shodashī is connected to the refreshing elements; the water and the Moon. The important point of the approach was the search for the material that would best convey the deep nature of the Goddess.

As I began to work on the Goddesses, I soon realized that it was impossible for me to restrict my understanding solely to the traditional perspective. I would have found this too confining. Thus, the presented images link to the age-old tradition, but meanwhile breathing a contemporary air. You will see that I took my liberties with respect to the tradition and I treated the subject with my European sensitivity.

2 Dhūmāvātī

Dhūmāvātī is the grandmother, the ancestor, the guide. She transmits the knowledge that comes from the harsh experiences of life. She is the widow, feminine principle unassociated with the masculine. Linked to potential, unmanifested, and latent energies, she governs the end of life.

In Hindu iconography Dhūmāvātī is represented as an old wrinkled woman, tall and thin, with ruffled hair. She arouses fright, her complexion is dark, her stare hard, her nose long and crooked. Dressed in rags that reveal her withered, sagging breasts, she seeks quarrel and is always hungry and thirsty. Sitting on a cart that goes nowhere, accompanied by crows, she gathers in herself all that is bad omen. Her representation joins the archetype of a witch, the Baba Yaga of the Slavic tales. However, some representations show her with an understanding smile and her right hand in *abhayamudrā*, a gesture that dispels fear.

With her ugly and repulsive appearance, Dhūmāvātī teaches us to look beyond the illusion of ephemeral beauty. The wicker screen she holds in her left hand invites us to discern the real weave of the world. Under ugliness, beauty lies. We must not stop at appearances but seize the deep nature of things. Open the door of the unmanifested. The outer beauty fades, but our divine Self remains intact.

Dhūmāvātī is our guide in failure when everything falls apart. She shows the way to letting go. She is the emptiness in which all forms are dissolved, the cessation of the agitation of the mind, the ultimate silence. On the cosmic level, Dhūmāvātī is Mahāpralaya, the Great Dissolution.

2.1 Dhūmāvātī Creation Notebook

Here is the rough description of how my creative process had been proceeding when I was making an attempt to depict Dhūmāvātī. There was one of the myths of Dhūmāvātī's birth at the beginning. She is said to be born from the smoke of Satī's body, consumed by the flames in the sacrificial pyre set up by her father. As such, she maintains the aspect of the insulted and outraged Satī. As smoke, she would be an extension of Satī's physical form.

Dhūmāvātī should be shown as hiding, obscuring space in order to get open access to another reality, through dissolving forms. This means the portrayal of a dissolving shape, giving importance to voids and white highlights, to imply climbing, flying and disappearing movements as the underlying energy is stirring the space between the solids. It has to look like a staggering approach, she is not going anywhere; this is about spiritual elevation.

I had to find the material and the technique to tell the dissolution and chose that Dhūmāvātī would be drawn from smoke. To get in reliance with this particular state, I practiced Yoga nidra, to reach the state where we no longer perceive the outer world, invoking the Goddess: *Dhum Dhum Dhūmāvātī Swahā*. Smoke involves movement in every direction but mainly upwards, before it dissipates. So verticality had to be the principal trait of her silhouette. In order to find the inspiration for elevation, I looked upon Giacometti's sculptures and drawings and chose for her to be vertical and slender, like a Gothic cathedral, carrying away our sight towards the sky.

What a joy to note that on a smoky background, it is possible to create forms by taking away the smoke with an eraser! At the same time, the gesture being symbolic, when I erase the smoke, an empty space appears. By this technique I get even closer to the nature of the Goddess.

Once again, I feel a connection with the cathedral: the importance of empty spaces inside as well as outside. The choice of BLACK and WHITE with shades of gray is essential: the color would prevent me from going to the essential. I use charcoal (which is a branch of charred wood) and pencil. Light touches, wavering. I use the bread crumbs' eraser. Sometimes, a touch of bold pastel (Fig. 2–4).



Fig. 2. She Who Resides in Smoke »
smoke, eraser, pencil, bold pastel



Fig. 3. Dhūmāvati's Smile
» mixed techniques



Fig. 4. Staggering Dhūmāvati » pencil

3 Kālī

One of the myths about the birth of Kālī sees her appearing from the Durgā forehead on a battlefield. She embodies Durgā anger and fury. Her skin is night-blue, her hair luxuriant and wildly ruffled. On a battlefield in the midst of corpses and mutilated bodies she shows off her nudity under a skirt of human arms.

Around her neck, a skulls' necklace. She inspires fear and terror. Her body is young and beautiful, the bosom generous, firm. She is beautiful, a beauty that hypnotizes. Her four arms symbolize the rhythm of the universe: on the right, the gesture of protection (*abhayamudrā*) and the gesture of giving (*varadamudrā*), on the left: the upper hand holds a bloody sword, the lower hand grasps by the hair a freshly-cut head. This is the cycle of birth and death, of creation and destruction.

Kālī is frequently represented dancing or walking on Shiva's body lying on the ground. The Goddess right foot (most of the time) takes support from Shiva's rib cage. Shiva is lifeless, Kālī, his life energy, his Shakti left him. The background of the scene is a crematory field. Fires and jackals devouring corpses. The face of the Goddess is red, her eyes filled with blood, her tongue hanging. Sometimes the fangs are represented. On other representations she is shown in full sexual intercourse seated on Shiva's body, in a dominant position.

Kālī is the Goddess of creation and destruction. She teaches us that for the new to be born, the old must be destroyed. The saber and the severed head symbolize the destruction of ignorance, of all misconceptions that prevent us from recognizing our true nature. It is also the abandonment of all attachment, but especially the sacrifice of the ego. Kālī's sword opens the door of spiritual liberation.

Kālī is the feminine of time (Kālā). Time does pass and overcomes all things, destroying, consuming everything. It is in time that the world develops, that we are born, live our life and it is the time that takes us to start again the spiral of another cycle. Time is the rhythm of our lives. Their origin and their end. It is the mother who swallows her children; one of the terrifying aspects of Kālī (Frawley 1996, 66). The night-blue, the color of her skin, is also that of space and infinite time.

Kālī is also the angry and expanding female principle – formidable principle, who has the audacity to transgress social norms, who laughs upon taboos and prohibitions, who freely displays her sexual appetite, which asserts herself with violence. Fierce and uncontrollable, Kālī dominates Shiva, and it is she who incites him to destructive madness.

3.1 Kālī Creation Notebook

My creative process had been initiated by a notion of Kālī associated with time, transformation, violence, explosion, revolution and fire. She is the force of liberation through a radical change. Through her dances, the movement transforms itself, bringing rhythm, freedom, evoking the frank and captivating beauty of femininity.

She will be movement; she will be trance. To represent her twisting, the shapes will come in circles and spirals. For this effect, I had to start from a central point, then spread out this exploding energy towards the limits of the sheet. It is a concentrated energy that bursts and unfolds on all sides.

I was inspired by the work of Cao Guo Kong, a Chinese artist who works with canon powder; and listened to *Dead Can Dance* music during the creation process. I also experienced the power of *kālimudrā* and of *kālīāsana*.

I chose to associate deep black, black gray, midnight blue with red, yellow and mauve fire colors. I experienced with materials such as acrylic, soot mix, ash, pastel bold, pencil on linseed oil, so the line is thicker, stronger, the pencil slips and its movement is faster than the thought. The shapes came in circles and spirals.

So transgression and acceptance of uncontrollable overflows were the key to the drawing gestures: no hesitation, they had to be spontaneous, free, fast, decided and sharp. No desire to master the gesture ever led me during this act of creation.

Kālī is sticking-out her tongue. In the dictionary of symbols: "*The tongue is considered a flame. It has its shape and its mobility. It destroys or purifies. As an instrument of speech, it creates or annihilates, its power is unlimited.*" (Ronberg and Martin 2011, 561). David Kingsley (1997, 87) sees in Kālī's stucked-out tongue the symbol of the conquest of rajasic power (the red tongue) by the sattvic forces (the white teeth). Kali is purely sattvic, having passed all the impurities of the two other *Gunas*. This organ of the body as a symbol contains all the nature of the Goddess.

Now, I often realize that my best paintings are those that came to me spontaneously. Their execution usually takes only but a short time. Everything leading up to execution is not too intellectualize leaving space for randomness. As a matter of fact, it is as if all of a sudden, I was charged with an energy and I released myself in the act of creation. Questions that find unexpected answers, that seem self-evident.

Time is suspended and becomes very dense. A state of total presence. The knowhow is there, but only as discrete frame. The field to new experiences is wild open.

The image of Kālī was created thus. At the end of the work session, I started scribbling on a sheet of paper. I spread linseed oil on it and, before the oil was dry, the pencil began to slide leaving a dense and thick line. Circular movements, circles and more circles. Strongly pressed. Then, sharp streaks. And, she was born that way, this vision of Kālī, the fruit of an energy that directed my hand letting not the mind interfere. Nothing was planned or organized. Things were done by themselves. Certainly, the drawings that came before could already predict it, but, for me, it came out of nothingness, silence, a condensation of energy that, by itself, had to unfold itself. I was just a performer at the service of this energy deployment. It was a moment of bliss (Fig. 5–6).



Fig. 5. Kālī » pastel bold, pencil, linseed oil on paper



Fig. 6. Kālī » mixed techniques

4 Shodashī

With Shodashī we depart from the energies of fire, destructive energies, to enter the refreshing world, related to water and Moon.

Shodashī sits at Mount Peru, mythical mountain, the axis of the world. Her complexion is rosy as dawn and shines with the brightness of the rising Sun. She wears a crescent Moon at the top of her head. Her body is like pure crystal. The hymns sing her exceptional beauty, her sweetness and grace, emphasizing the erotic character of the goddess. Endowed with purely sattvic qualities, she is bliss herself.

Shodashī means “one who is sixteen” or “one who is sixteenth”. According to David Kingsley (1997, 121), this would refer to the fifteen phases of the Moon (*tithis*), fifteen in the rising phase and fifteen in the descendant. In the Indian pantheon each phase is personified by a Goddess. As the sixteenth, Shodashī is beyond these phases, beyond the rhythm of time.

She is also called *Balā*, “Child”, “Girl” or *Lalitā*, the “Charming”, or *Tripura Sundarī*, “Beauty of Three Cities” (Suryanarayana-murti 1975, 59, 84, 98, 143). With her four arms she holds a bow made of a sugar cane, five arrows in the shape of flowers, a noose and a hook. The bow symbolizes the mind, the flower arrows, the five senses which allow us to know the manifested world. The noose is the power to capture us by its beauty (Harshananda 1986, 137). It can also be interpreted as the link of attraction that assembles matter on several levels, from atoms to cells and even to human beings to form a couple (Kempton 2013, 282). The sting is anger or aversion that hurts.

Shodashī also reigns over the whole universe as *Rajarajeshvari*, “Queen of Kings”. Her first role is to ensure cosmic stability and to ensure the preservation of the Dharma. She has a warlike aspect. She is an emanation of Kālī, purified after a long asceticism. The myths tell of the battle in which she fights and kills the demon Bhandā and revives Kāma, God of love and desire. From the tips of her nails were born the ten avatars of Vishnu. The whole universe was created with a grain of dust from her feet. She is associated with the land and its nurturing aspect. She is the Goddess of Vedas and Vedantic knowledge.

Shodashī commands the universe and her commands are based on love. The wisdom of Shodashī is to find happiness, joy, rapture in all that life brings us. The world takes on the look full of freshness and wonder, as if we were only sixteen years old again.

4.1 Shodashī Creation Notebook

It is hard to free yourself from Kālī’s energy to meet Shodashī, she who is bliss, divine beauty, the queen of radiance and effulgence. Vibration of beauty, youth and freshness are her features while also suggesting the erotic aspect of Tripura Sundarī the cosmic rose.

During this period of creation, I endeavored to look at the world with amazed gaze, contemplating beauty, developing love in myself. I practiced at dawn, meditating, with *yonimudrā* and *sahasraramudrā*, bathed in the sweet greeting of the Sun.

To express this force of attraction, desire and love, one has to resort to an easy and elegant pencil line. Graceful, curvaceous curves would need to show a delicate being more in shapes than in lines, expressing together the softness and the strength.

The season of roses was starting; contemplating and smelling the scent of rose at sunrise inspired me for the line that would be at the bottom of the drawings: a curve of soft colors, acidulous, that say the light of dawn, that express freshness.

The choice of the material that would connect us to the nature of Shodashī came as soft pastel and watercolor, using paper mad of flower petals. I watched beauties in the works of Sandro Botticelli including *The Birth of Venus*, felt the energy of Shodashī, which is manifested in the smile of *Ife’s Heads* (one of eighteen copper alloy sculptures that were unearthed in 1938 at Ife, Nigeria).

I only took a few notes when creating the images of Shodashī. Is it because with this Goddess we are more we are more in the feeling and the perception than in analysis and the intellect?

The contact with nature, especially on the Full Moon evenings, inspired me. A small group of us used to meet once a month to walk under the Full Moon barefoot along the coast. I still remember the sensations of the soil under my feet; the texture of sand, earth, rocks, moss, the softness of bamboo leaves. Strong connection with the energy of the Earth and the beautiful, generous presence of the Moon. Facing the sea, facing the wind, we sang mantras. All our senses were awake. I have imagined Shodashī connected to the Moon. Playing with the Moon. Extended in space. I saw in her “*the experience of the flow of Soma or nectar of bliss*” (Frawley 1996, 90).



Fig. 7. Shodashī » soft pastel

5 Conclusion

Is the Goddess depicted on the first illustration of the present article really “Kālī Clad in Space”? Wouldn’t she rather be Shodashī, the experience of the Soma flow? Why is Dhūmāvātī, the grandmother (Staggering Dhūmāvātī) displaying one breast in agreement to her nature, while the other breast is like a young woman’s?

In some representations, the Mahāvidyā can look alike and adopt some marks or an appearance similar to one of her companions. The idea I wished to translate, in visual language, is that all the Vidyā are the manifestations of Mahādevī, the Great Goddess.

Mahādevī also lives in a young woman, called *Venus of the Plastics*, whose picture taken by photographer Channi Anand, in an industrial waste dump in North India was shared worldwide. Proud, dignified and covered with jewels, as the Goddess Matangī, the young woman rises not from the food crumbs of divine couples (as told by the myth), but from a sea of plastic bags. Her hands and arms are covered with a toxic white insecticide powder. The noble pose of the Rag

lady strongly opposes with the dirty and polluted environment. The often-expressed idea of the tantric texts finds here a beautiful illustration. We should consider not only the Ten Mahāvidyās but every woman as the manifestation of Mahādevī. Every woman carries herself a teaching and reveals to us the “Great knowledge of the subtle things”.

During the work on the representations of Kālī, Shodashī and Dhūmāvātī, at times, I had the impression of being just “a channel”, “a tool” through which the energy of the Goddess was expressing itself. I felt this energy flow in me, through my own body, through my own nervous system. I felt this energy living in me. Creating images has become a form of Yoga practice. An experience of the bond woven with the Divinity. The subtle link, spiritual, but also material, is experienced in the body.

At present, after all this journey, I feel that I have more and more things to discover, new ideas about the Goddesses are coming to me and the desire to explore them does not dry up. I feel that the door to the Vidyā is only ajar.

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