

Feminine Death: The Righteous Fury That Comes from the Love of a Mother

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Introduction¹

This article explores the dichotomy between life and death and two figures who straddle this divide while inspiring fervent devotion. These deities have developed in separate continents, and are situated within different religions, yet share a number of striking similarities. These female divinities are Kali, the destructive mother goddess of the Indian subcontinent, and the popular folk saint of Mexico, La Santa Muerte, the Holy Death. Both dark ladies are worshipped as mother, protector, and destroyer, prayed to by the poor, the rich, the weak, and the powerful alike. The motivations for devotion to these deities will be explored, and of special interest is how they are interpreted as both loving mother and vengeful destroyer. Of primary interest is the way that their worshippers engage with the idea of death, and why beings of such immeasurable power are imagined as such frightening females. These deities shall be explored through the argument that colonialism has allowed for syncretic religions to evolve and for the qualities of older religions to be changed and optimized for the sensibilities of the European settlers. These dark goddesses have arisen to help the needy, the poor, and the struggling, as they offer care and protection. They also, for the right price and votive offering, offer the ultimate of blessings, that of destruction and chaos, the righteous fury of total protection that comes from the encompassing love of a mother.

Kali, great mother and protector of not only humanity but also the world, is examined first, due to her historical precedence. Kali's place within the order of the universe shall be discussed through first a creation story, then a discussion of the many representative avatars of the great

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mother, and how those avatars are worshipped and symbolically perceived by adherents. Finally we shall explore why, and how, those avatars are worshipped and what her children gain from venerating the dark mother. From this discussion the extent of Kali's cosmic powers will be demonstrated. Second, the cult of Holy Death, La Santa Muerte, the folk saint that protects the vulnerable and the proud, worshipped as a mother while taking the appearance of a grinning skeleton, is considered. This syncretic deity shall be explored in a similar fashion; the colonial history and the Mexican religious landscape that enabled her creation, the variations in the form that she takes, what she represents, and most importantly why she is worshipped, will be addressed.

Lastly, a comparison of the two holy mothers is undertaken, analyzing the reasons behind why these deities are venerated more so than other, less frightening and definitely less dangerous options within both Hinduism and Mexican Catholicism. By focusing on the similarities that these dark goddesses share—from worship and rituals, to the adherents who gain power and safety by venerating these dark mothers—it will be shown that while these deities are from separate faiths and continents they are still utilized for the same purposes. Through these comparisons a narrative emerges, showing how similar and still so different these divine mothers are. The conclusion explores the strange, yet loving, dichotomy of these terrible and yet motherly figures. Each is worshipped by all facets of society, and both offer something that no other deity can offer: love and protection, where adherents might not find it anywhere else, in extreme situations and times of desperation.

Kali: Great Mother, Great Destroyer

The strange and terrible tale of the birth, or origin, of Kali begins with the gods of the Vedic pantheon granting a boon of protection to a demon known as Mahisasura, shielding the demon from any harm that comes from a man.² Mahisasura began to cause trouble for the gods, and established himself as their leader because there was nothing male gods could do to restrain him. The collective anger of the gods manifested in the form of the goddess Durga who, armed with the celestial weapons of the gods, was

² Raman Kapur, 'Kali: The Indian Goddess of Destruction and Containing Castration Impulses in Groups', *Gender Issues in Group Therapy*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2008), p. 36.

dispatched to destroy Mahisasura.³ The power of the demon and the goddess were equally matched and neither could best the other, until the gods told Durga that Mahisasura was vulnerable to the naked female form.⁴



Figure 1 – Durga slays Mahisasura (Wikimedia Commons).

Durga stripped off her armour and strength and power drained immediately from the demon, allowing Durga to slay him (see Figure 1).⁵ Durga was aghast at the thought of the gods giving such a powerful boon to one so evil, but was also wrathful that the gods would keep the secret to defeating Mahisasura from her. A great and terrible rage entered the goddess.⁶ The story then diverts into two separate versions; one states that Durga herself turns into Kali, her skin turning black as night, and that the anger of the goddess was unleashed on the world in this form.⁷ The second version suggests that the anger felt by Durga gave birth to Kali, who appeared from

³ David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), p. 96.

⁴ Kapur, 'Kali', p. 36.

⁵ Kapur, 'Kali', p. 36.

⁶ Kapur, 'Kali', p. 36.

⁷ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, p. 118.

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within Durga, a goddess separate from Durga and fuelled by anger and rage, who dances the wild dance of destruction.⁸ The story ends the same way for both narrative streams: the great Kali gives in to her bloodlust and begins to indiscriminately slay every living thing in sight. The gods in their panic beg Shiva to convince Kali to end the destruction. Shiva lies down in her path, where she eventually tramples on him and realizes that she has given in to her anger and ceases her rampage.⁹



Figure 2 – Kali Puja 2016 (Wikimedia Commons).

Kali is most often portrayed as a fierce-looking deity with multiple arms, each holding a deadly weapon, and a blood-red tongue lolling from her fanged mouth.¹⁰ Traditionally Kali is portrayed with blue skin (a sign of

⁸ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, pp. 118-119; June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 238.

⁹ Seema Mohanty, *The Book of Kali* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 16.

¹⁰ Elizabeth U. Harding, *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar* (York Beach, ME: Nicolas-Hays, 1993), p. 16.

divinity in the Hindu tradition) but she may also have black skin depending on which manifestation is being worshipped. The goddess has ten divine manifestations,¹¹ each with their own name and specific representation, the most typical of which is that of Bhadra-Kali (see Figure 2), worshipped within both household and community shrines in India. Her most fearsome manifestation is that of the Smashana-Kali, found and worshipped within one of her favoured sites, the crematorium.¹² Her association with fringe, liminal areas, such as cremation grounds and battlefields, permits Kali to be viewed as an outsider to the wider Hindu ceremonial milieu.¹³ Her many manifestations, despite the differing names and visual markers, continue to resemble the same awful visage of terror and destruction. Kali is armed with weapons, wears the corpses of children as earrings, a necklace of skulls, and severed heads still dripping with blood are worn on her belt.¹⁴ This is Kali, the great consort of Shiva, protector of humanity, and divine mother to her devotees.

Kali is considered an important member of the pantheon of Hindu deities. Tasked with overseeing the universe, Kali is the “divine form of cosmic destruction.”¹⁵ She is the goddess (or *Shakti*, female divine energy) that represents the physical aspect of nature, time, and the universe that existed within the primeval void long before the world took form. She is responsible for the origin of all of creation, and at the end of creation she will be responsible for its destruction.¹⁶ Her name refers to “time, death and the color black,”¹⁷ and promotes understanding of the end of all things, as everything that exists must one day cease to exist.¹⁸ As Kali represents both time and the universe, without her there can be no change, as change occurs in time—simply existing within a world in which all things are regulated through this change means believers are subject to her whims and her

¹¹ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers*, p. 254.

¹² Mohanty, *The Book of Kali*, p. 11.

¹³ Heather Elgood, *Hinduism and the Religious Arts*, Religion and the Arts (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), p. 73.

¹⁴ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, p. 116.

¹⁵ Vivienne Kondos, ‘Images of the Fierce Goddess and Portrayals of Hindu Women’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 20, no. 2 (July 1986), p. 175.

¹⁶ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers*, p. 243. Note that Kali’s role is directly parallel to that of Shiva, the third deity of the Trimurti, the Destroyer.

¹⁷ Kondos, ‘Images of the Fierce Goddess and Portrayals of Hindu Women’, p. 175.

¹⁸ Mohanty, *The Book of Kali*, p. 17.

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mercy.¹⁹ Kali represents a primal divinity; she is both Devi (a supreme manifestation of the female divine), but can also be considered simply as one of the many representations of the divine.²⁰ Her general appearance, her nakedness, the wild untamed hair, and the trails of blood that follow in her wake, are strikingly violent and intentionally frightening, but for Hindu adherents of Kali, these qualities signify her powers of divine protection.²¹

Rituals undertaken in praise of Kali may involve household shrine veneration as well as larger ritual veneration during festivals. In certain parts of the Hindu milieu, such as in Nepal, blood sacrifices are offered to the dark goddess. These sacrifices utilize a black goat as a representative for the various wants and needs of those participating in the sacrificial ritual.²² Through the actions of the sacrifice the goat is transformed into something that exists both within the physical world but also in the unmanifest world in which Kali resides.²³ Other blood rituals take place in front of shrines, where blood is used as a lure designed to draw Kali towards the adherents so that they can capture some of her power. These rituals are for the destruction of enemies, to invoke the protection of the goddess, and for the removal of obstructions in the life of the devotee.²⁴

While blood sacrifices and rituals are ways to worship Kali, Elizabeth Harding argues that the truest site of Kali worship are cremation grounds, where ash from funeral pyres, sun bleached bones, and large carrion birds scavenging from the dead harken back to Kali's essential connection to death. Those that worship in cremation grounds have no fear of pollution: worshipping in such places proves their loyalty and devotion to Kali.²⁵ Kali is worshipped by all strata of Indian society, with annual *pujas* taking place to attempt to capture part of the essence of the divine mother, and also to celebrate her.²⁶ Devotees worship at these *pujas* for a myriad reasons, from help conceiving a child, a blessing to feed their family, and most important due to Kali's cosmic nature to ask to be sped

¹⁹ Kondos, 'Images of the Fierce Goddess and Portrayals of Hindu Women', p. 175.

²⁰ Mohanty, *The Book of Kali*, p. 3.

²¹ Mohanty, *The Book of Kali*, 12; Harding, *Kali*, p. 39.

²² Elgood, *Hinduism and the Religious Arts*, p. 73.

²³ Kondos, 'Images of the Fierce Goddess and Portrayals of Hindu Women', p. 182.

²⁴ Kondos, 'Images of the Fierce Goddess and Portrayals of Hindu Women', p. 177.

²⁵ Harding, *Kali*, p. 37.

²⁶ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers*, p. 249; Kim A. Wagner, 'The Deconstructed Stranglers: A Reassessment of Thuggee', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4 (October 2004), p. 953.

off *samsara* (the wheel of birth, death and rebirth) and into her embrace, ending one's earthly misery.²⁷ These cosmic actions are understood within Kali's role as a representative of both time and destruction, annihilating the shackles that tie adherents to worldly existence, but also as the cosmic mother, welcoming them into her arms in the realm of the gods.²⁸

Kali is the divine mother, protector, and the cosmic destroyer. Her existence enables the creation of both the earth and her worshippers, but her existence will also bring those things to an end. Kali worship looks towards the future, it provides safety for the present, and the possibility of an eternity with their cosmic mother. It also involves polluting and taboo practices that are permissible in the context of the cult of the terrifying mother who is innately associated with death. This essay will now turn its focus on another divine mother of death, the Skeleton Saint, Santa Muerte.

Santa Muerte: Holy Mother, Holy Death

While Kali is an ancient goddess Santa Muerte (see Figure 3) is a relatively recent divinity. The history of Mexico, both pre- and post- colonization, has fostered a version of the Catholicism brought from Spain, syncretised with local and indigenous Meso-American beliefs.²⁹ Mexican Catholicism, a series of interpretations developed by Mexican communities, is a dynamic and ever-changing system of belief, which incorporates indigenous interpretations of the Catholic dogma but also indigenous beliefs interpreted within a Catholic framework.³⁰ The past few centuries have seen the Catholic clergy attempting to stem the tide of religious creativity in Mexico, and to contain if possible not only the use of indigenous folklore but also the adaptation of Mexican Catholic inventions, which meld the past and present.³¹

²⁷ Kondos, 'Images of the Fierce Goddess and Portrayals of Hindu Women', p. 176.

²⁸ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, p. 116.

²⁹ Pamela Bastante and Brenton Dickieson, 'Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras: The Enigmatic Identity of Santa Muerte', *Journal of the Southwest*, vol. 55, no. 4 (2013), p. 436.

³⁰ Jennifer Scheper Hughes, 'The Niño Jesús Doctor: Novelty and Innovation in Mexican Religion', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2012), p. 7.

³¹ Hughes, 'The Niño Jesús Doctor', p. 8.



Figure 3 – Close-up of a Santa Muerte, south of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico (Wikimedia Commons).

Mexico has a long tradition of euhemerism, adapting historical figures that are revered in a folkloric sense into beings that are worshipped. This syncretic interpretation of Catholic identity and indigenous spirit can be seen amongst figures such as San Juan Soldado, a convicted felon who is now prayed to by people seeking to cross borders; San Jesus Malverde, a Mexican ‘Robin Hood’ folk entity idealized as a bandit saint; and the second most popular folk saint, next to Santa Muerte, San Judas Tadeo, a Mexican folk adaptation of Saint Jude, the patron saint of lost causes.³² San Judas Tadeo has become popular for the disenfranchised and the poor,

³² Hughes, ‘The Niño Jesús Doctor’, p. 5; Bastante and Dickieson, ‘Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras’, p. 444.

particularly amongst the Mexican street youths and gang members.³³ As Jennifer Hughes points out, not all new saints are *banditos* or synonymous with violent figures. One of the most revered new saints is that of Santa Niño Jesús Doctor, the baby Jesus dressed as a doctor, worshipped mostly in rural areas where medical care is scarce.³⁴ Such folk saints were typically human at one point just like their followers, and know the pain and suffering that their devotees endure, but now as divine entities the desperate masses can pray to them to work in their favour.³⁵ Santa Muerte, however, is different, as R. Andrew Chesnut states that the skeleton saint is not only one of the most popular folk saints, she is also the *only* one not based on a (known) real-life figure.³⁶

The usage of the name 'Santa Muerte' was first recorded in the 1790s when the indigenous population of the Mexican Valley venerated a skeleton referred to as Santa Muerte.³⁷ The Holy Death is not the only skeleton saint in Latin America: in Guatemala there is San Pascual Rey, and Argentina worships San La Muerte, but unlike these other folk saints the Mexican Santa Muerte is the only female representation of this character.³⁸ One origin for this feminine figure could be the Spanish representation of feminine death known as La Parca, whose image was used in attempts by the colonial clergy to attempt to communicate to new indigenous converts the abstract doctrines of Catholicism.³⁹ The stylistic references for the folk saint's appearance are a combination of both Meso-American beliefs and the Catholic Church's own European interpretation of death and its symbols.

The most prevalent indigenous forebears to Mexico's death saints are the pre-Columbian and Meso-American deities of the underworld, Mictlantecutli (see Figure 4) and Mictecacihauatl, the God and Goddess of

³³ Hughes, 'The Niño Jesús Doctor', p. 5.

³⁴ Hughes, 'The Niño Jesús Doctor', p. 5.

³⁵ Christine A. Whittington, 'La Santa Muerte: Origin and Significance of a Mexican Folk Saint' (Master's dissertation, Wake Forest University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, North Carolina 2011), p. 2.

³⁶ Bastante and Dickieson, 'Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras', p. 438.

³⁷ Bastante and Dickieson, 'Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras', p. 439.

³⁸ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (New York: Oxford University, 2012), p. 6.

³⁹ Bastante and Dickieson, 'Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras', p. 438; Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, p. 28.

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death in the Aztec Empire.⁴⁰ These fearsome deities ruled over the lowest level of the underworld, known as Mictlan, where the bones of the dead were stored, and appeared as blood splattered skeletons processing the dead.⁴¹ When the *conquistadores* took control of Mexico and imported the Catholic religion they also imported their own folk ideas and symbols. The skeleton saint is sometimes dressed in an outfit that would not look out of place on a statue of Mary, or specifically the Latin American Virgin of Guadalupe.⁴² Other Catholic motifs such as that of the representation of human mortality with the ‘Memento Mori’ skull and crossbones, and skeletons and other dark figures carved onto funeral biers also helped solidify these aspects of her particular image.⁴³



Figure 4 – Mictlantecuhtli, Codex Borgia (Wikimedia Commons).

⁴⁰ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, p. 28.

⁴¹ Whittington, ‘La Santa Muerte’, p. 12.

⁴² Bastante and Dickieson, ‘Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras’, p. 438.

⁴³ Whittington, ‘La Santa Muerte’, p. 23.

Just like Kali, Santa Muerte has multiple avatars or representations that are worshipped depending on what the adherent wishes the outcome to be. For instance, a worshipper who wishes to fall in love, or have someone fall in love with them, or simply have a union blessed, prays to 'The Pretty Lady', a grinning skeleton in a red gown. The 'Pretty Lady' also deals with the opposite of falling in love, with adherents praying to her to punish cheating or lying partners.⁴⁴ The traditional mother figure is known as 'the White Girl', and is prayed to for everyday things. The White Girl is generally venerated unless the adherent has need for one of the more specific representations of the Lady. There is, like Kali, the ultimate form of Holy Death, the black clad epitome of destruction who is prayed to and left offerings if a devotee needs protection or needs the ultimate proof of the love of a mother, requiring someone to be harmed or killed.⁴⁵ Those who worship the dark goddess still contend that their faith is that of the Roman Catholic Church—they are simply appealing to Holy Death at times when they need her.⁴⁶

Santa Muerte has a much more familial relationship with her adherents than Kali. Her folk status results in a warm view of her, in that she is considered as an aspect of the will of society, rather than of the Church.⁴⁷ While the Catholic Church has attempted numerous times to stamp out Santa Muerte worship, these attempts have failed as devotional activities can be simply moved from the streets into private houses.⁴⁸ As previously stated, those who pray to her will refer to her via a series of differing names, however some names connote differing levels of affection and familiarity; such as one street vendor with a small Santa Muerte shrine in his cart, who referred to her lovingly as *Cabrona*, which translates as

⁴⁴ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, p. 20; John Thompson, 'Santísima Muerte: On the Origin and Development of a Mexican Occult Image', *Journal of the Southwest*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1998), p. 407.

⁴⁶ Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker, 'Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2010), p. 165.

⁴⁷ D. E. Campbell, 'A Saint for Lost Souls', *Foreign Policy* (26 April 2010) at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/04/26/a-saint-for-lost-souls>. Accessed 18 August 2017.

⁴⁸ 'U.S. Bishops Join Mexican Colleagues, Denounce "Santa Muerte"', *Crux* (21 February 2017) at <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/02/21/us-bishops-join-mexico-colleagues-denounce-santa-muerte>. Accessed 18 August 2017.

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'Battle-axe'.⁴⁹ It is this familiarity that both testifies to, and enhances, her popularity. The lady of death is venerated because she is accessible to all levels of society. While media and popular culture tend to market her as a religious icon for the gangsters and drug cartels that spread violence in Mexico, she is worshipped by any who feel as if they have been abandoned and cast aside among the Mexican population.⁵⁰

Those who feel outcast by both the Church and the Mexican government include the poor, the homeless, drug addicts, sex workers, and members of the LGBTQIA community and all are welcome in her embrace. Santa Muerte does not judge anyone based on their lives, and she treats everyone equally and fairly, as death is shared by all humanity.⁵¹ Those who pray to her do so at shrines dedicated to whichever representation of the lady they need help from, with the above detailed representations being prayed to at different times or at the same time. Santa Muerte's followers utilize candles, prayer cards, figurines of the saint, and other votive offerings at these shrines.⁵² Working with these shrines are Santa Muerte 'churches', gatherings of the faithful that have shared devotional gatherings to the mainstream Catholic churches, but with the difference that they are solely dedicated to the White Lady.⁵³ The Saint of Death is the ultimate dichotomy: she is light and darkness, power and weakness, and she is also mother and destroyer. She stands for protection (in various forms) against terrible things that make the lives of humans desperate. The next section compares these goddesses of death and destruction, and the way their devotees view both life and death.

Fear and Love, Life and Death

Both Kali and Santa Muerte are divine manifestations of mothers who both protect and destroy. Both deities exist today in forms affected by colonialism. Kali in the ancient texts was painted as a wild and free woman,

⁴⁹ Bastante and Dickieson, 'Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras', p. 437; Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Bastante and Dickieson, 'Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras', p. 439.

⁵¹ Stephen Woodman, 'Rejected by Church, Mexican Transgender Women Turn to Skeleton Saint', *Houston Chronicle* (20 May 2017) at <http://www.houstonchronicle.com/life/houston-belief/article/Rejected-by-church-Mexican-transgender-women-11162015.php>. Accessed 18 August 2017.

⁵² Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, pp. 8-9.

⁵³ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, pp. 8-9.

naked and unashamed. It was not until the British colonized India that the representations and depictions of Kali were presented as an evil and malicious deity, popularized through the (entirely fraudulent) theory that the Thuggee cult, a gang of murderous robbers, sacrificed their victims to her.⁵⁴ Santa Muerte was born from colonialism in Mexico. The mission to convert Mexico began a system of forcible indoctrination of the indigenous population to Catholicism.⁵⁵ The syncretic religion that emerged from this is a narrative created from an indigenous worldview, mixing with an introduced religion being forcibly imposed, thereby creating a new religious formation that took root amongst the population.⁵⁶

Both goddesses are worshipped because they offer something that the other, more generally benevolent and less dangerous gods and saints do not offer, that is, the sense of someone or something looking out for the wellbeing of an adherent, regardless of the morality or social acceptability of their actions. In the case of Santa Muerte, she is prayed to and venerated because she offers services that God will not promise: God is omnipotent and the creator of the earth in the Catholic worldview, but will not kill to please a petitioner.⁵⁷ Kali is worshipped because she is a primordial force of nature, and nature has the capacity to protect those who worship her, in particular from the pollutions of death.⁵⁸ To worship Kali is to worship that which even gods fear, and the ability to utilize her power results in the added benefit of protection, akin to how praying to the Black Santa Muerte will result in protection.⁵⁹

This protection is also considered maternal, with both goddesses being referred to as ‘mothers’. The mother, in these most basic terms, is she who cares and nurtures a child through good and bad times, and who will never abandon that child. Both goddesses offer care and protection to all who petition them, which becomes a reason to afford them the holy ‘mother’ title. Kali is the mother of the universe, she created and cares for a

⁵⁴ Wagner, ‘The Deconstructed Stranglers’, p. 953.

⁵⁵ Piotr Grzegorz Michalik, ‘Death with a Bonus Pack: New Age Spirituality, Folk Catholicism, and the Cult of Santa Muerte’, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, no. 153 (2011), pp. 162-63.

⁵⁶ Campbell, ‘A Saint for Lost Souls’, p. 36.

⁵⁷ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, p. 60.

⁵⁸ Vrinda Dalmiya, ‘Loving Paradoxes: A Feminist Reclamation of the Goddess Kali’, *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2000), p. 126.

⁵⁹ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, p. 22.

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cosmic child; whereas Santa Muerte is costumed like the Virgin of Guadalupe, an indigenised Mexican representation of the Holy Virgin Mary, recognized by the Catholic Church as a sort of Christian goddess, as she is the mother of Jesus Christ, who is God and Saviour.⁶⁰

These goddesses are also linked by the concept of time. They both have an important connection to time and how it is perceived. Kali is the goddess of time, and Santa Muerte is associated with hourglasses, which she holds as a symbol of human life running out and death approaching.⁶¹ This connection to time is a constant reminder of a worshipper's mortality and that life, the world, and existence may be taken away at any moment. Worshipping those beings who embody this sudden loss garners the ability to determine an outcome and the possibility of extending the life on an individual basis (in the case of Santa Muerte), or the possibility of ceasing all life, and being embraced by Kali who saves devotees from the repetition of *samsara*. Time is a finite thing, at least in the terms of humanity, but by worshipping and praying to eternal beings who offer protection (at a price) that time may be extended or manipulated.⁶²

The visual attributes of these goddesses confer power and protection while being terrible and awesome. While the divine in religions like Christianity is considered beautiful and pure, the representations of the divine we see in Kali and Holy Death is the repulsive, the confronting, and the frightening. Santa Muerte is the easiest to explain with her skeleton visage being a *memento mori*, a reminder of death, and that all things will end.⁶³ Kali represents unlimited power, she is a cosmic creator and a cosmic destroyer, but she is also represented as the primal and unleashed power of nature. Kali's visage is a symbolic reminder that nature cannot be tamed by mortals.⁶⁴ David Kinsley states that Kali represents the ability to see beyond a limited perception, to see the world for what it really is, a place in which everyone has a role to play and to know that that role will one day end.⁶⁵ Mexicans and Hindus from all around the world view death differently to the common Western view: it is an ingrained part of society,

⁶⁰ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers*, p. 145; Bastante and Dickieson, 'Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras', p. 437.

⁶¹ Whittington, 'La Santa Muerte', p. 41.

⁶² Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, p. 126.

⁶³ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Dalmiya, 'Loving Paradoxes', p. 134.

⁶⁵ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, p. 130.

and devotion to Kali allows Hindus to be reconciled to death,⁶⁶ and Mexicans laugh at death where European Catholics would employ hymns and prayers.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Ultimately, Kali and Santa Muerte represent the primordial forces of time and nature, and remind their adherents that their time on this earth is limited. These goddesses afford protection from their lives, and from enemies, and will possibly allow them to eke out yet another day of life. Humanity puts faces on primal forces that are not easily understood, and Kali and Santa Muerte are testament to that. Death and destruction do not look beautiful; they are to be feared and rightfully so, but with the right knowledge, deep dedication, and active worship, they can be bargained with. This essay focused on two representations of the feminine divine in her aspect as the dark mother. Kali is the divine female warrior of the universe, the mother and protector of her worshippers, and at some point she will act to destroy the universe. She is fearsome and wild, and her aesthetic represents her role in the cosmic drama. She is an embodiment of wild nature, she protects the earth and her devotees, and if prayed to she can speed up their escape from *samsara* to enjoy her embrace. Santa Muerte is the protectress of all who need that which God and the saints of the Catholic Church will not give; the deaths of enemies, personal protection, and other dark desires.

Both Indian and Mexican cultures view death differently to the West, where youth is worshipped and death is feared. The Mexican and Indian societies both cultivate awareness that death is inevitable, and that mortality is something that all existence must come to terms with. With death comes the welcome embrace of the mother, they will be at peace, and any suffering they must endure while alive will cease. While living devotees pray to these dark deities because it gives them protection against the forces that intend them harm, having a fearsome divine mother to look over you provides an incentive to survive. Time and reason state that all things must end, individual life, the universe, and everything will someday cease to exist, but for followers of Kali and La Santa Muerte, the right prayers and votive offerings might enable an adherent to choose the time

⁶⁶ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, p. 127.

⁶⁷ Bastante and Dickieson, 'Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras', p. 437.

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and place of his or her own death, or the punishment of those they love and hate.