

## ‘Kali, the Asura’: The Human-like Manifestation of the Non-Human

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### ABSTRACT

Kali is considered to be the biggest antagonist in Hindu mythology that will bring darkness and will take the Kali-yuga cycle to its peak. Kali, is seen as a metaphor for everything that humanness stands against for and what generally, people regard as absence of humaneness. Thus, this paper focuses on the figure of kali, the Asura as a metaphor of the non-human, its popular understanding, the history of its birth and understanding of what it means in a religio-cultural context. Gradually the paper discusses what we call a human and what depravity or additions make them non-humans, in context of modern day references and relate them to present day thinkers.

**Keywords:** *Human, Non-Human, Mythology, Kali, Psychoanalysis*

**K**ali is a major antagonist in the Hindu mythology and is sometimes depicted as a powerful demon (asura), believed by some to be the origin of evil itself. He is considered a major opponent and the archenemy of Kalki, who is believed to be the tenth and final incarnation of the deity Vishnu. Kali governs the most corrupt and violent phase of the Hindu cycles, where humanity forsakes the gods, and morality gives way to rampant hostility and depravity. This era is referred to as the Kali Yuga (the current cycle we live in), named after its dark nature and the demon that presides over such malevolence. Kali is responsible and will be responsible for everything that is evil, monstrous including humans killing each other, thefts, no respect of relations, prostitution, manipulation, anger, fear, jealousy, contempt, cannibalism. Kali will take the cycle of kaliyuga to its highest level of inhumaneness and destruction of everything good within and around the travellers of earth.

The evil or the monster in a religious connotation can be seen in a variety of religious with a similar characterisation. Through, the names can be different in different relations. For example, Satan in Christianity, Mephisto in German folklore, Iblis in Islam and so on. This indicates that in most religions, there is always an antagonist present that enhances the goodness of the gods, or plays a role in understanding why the evil needs to be defeated in order for the goodness to shine. Stephen Asma (2009) observes that monsters symbolize malevolence or moral transgressions, and every era, in the words of Michel Foucault

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(Abnormal: lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–75, 2003), showcases a distinct form of monstrosity.

**Figure 1: Kali, the Asura.**



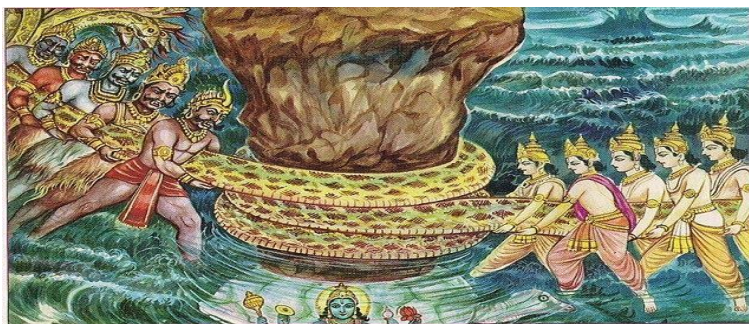
*Kali, the Asura. Retrieved from: <https://qph.cf2.quoracdn.net/main-qimg-5c9b7e90da8b18797b891b3fb4690d44-lq>*

### ***The Origins of kali and its popular understanding***

According to the Kalki Purana, Kali is depicted as a massive, dark-colored being with a prominent tongue and a repulsive smell. The Bhagavata Purana describes Kali as an asura (demon) with a dog-like face, brownish skin, sharp fangs, pointed ears, and long green bushy hair. He is depicted wearing kingly attire along with a red loincloth and adorned with golden jewelry. The Kalki Purana mentions that this demon chose gambling, liquor, prostitution, slaughter, and gold as his enduring dwelling places.

As per the Vishnu Purana, the churning of the ocean milk (samudra manthan) was one source of origin of Kali. The devas (gods) and asuras (demons) formed an alliance to jointly churn the Ocean of Milk, seeking the nectar of immortality, and agreed to share it among themselves. However, Vishnu assured the devas that they alone would obtain the nectar. The churning process was extensive, involving uprooting Mount Mandara to use as the churning rod and using Vasuki, a naga (snake) residing on Shiva's neck, as the churning rope. Vasuki agreed to participate in exchange for his share of the nectar. During this process, a powerful poison called halahala emerged, which Shiva consumed to save the world. This led to his throat turning blue. A portion of the poison not swallowed by Shiva fell on Kali, destroying his physical body. But he cunningly, got hold of few droplets of the immortal nectar making his soul immortal. Thus, Kali, with no body is still alive with his soul wandering the kaliyuga and occupying the minds of the mortal beings and making them commit sinful and evil deeds.

**Figure 2: "Samudra Manthan" as depicted in various literatures.**



*Retrieved from: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/54/Samudra-Manthan-The-Churning-of-the-Ocean-of-Milk.jpg/640px-Samudra-Manthan-The-Churning-of-the-Ocean-of-Milk.jpg>*

## **HUMANE AFFECTIONS TAKING A NON-HUMANE COURSE**

Kali, the asura, has been associated with all evil and negative affections that all we humans feel. The feelings of envy, contempt, hatred, jealousy etc., are considered to be negative, destructive and “unwanted”, especially if they exceed a certain limit. According to Royzman, McCauley, and Rozin (2005), hatred is described as the most harmful emotional phenomenon in the history of human nature. Existing literature demonstrates that hate has been defined in various ways, a common challenge when it comes to understanding emotions in general. Some definitions of hate include viewing it as an emotional attitude (Ekman, 1992), a syndrome (Solomon, 1977), or a type of generalized anger (Bernier & Dozier, 2002).

Although, since, all negative emotions are emotions nevertheless, central to being a human but the course they take, the intensity of expression they take, may be argued to whether they are justly a human-like response or not. Getting angry, and hitting someone is fairly normal, even individuals with anger-related issues may showcase their anger in a socially unacceptable manner or in an ‘abnormal’ intensity. But anger taking form of murdering others doesn’t seem to fit in the range of “socially acceptable” form of expression. The same frustrations and negative feelings when result in cannibalism, then, it is no longer a form of expression that is advisable and in a way, exceeds the parameter of pathological abnormality as well (which we will focus more in the coming sections of the paper).

This can be related to Rosaldo’s reading of Grief and a headhunter’s rage (1993), which cover the theme of anger and rage associated with grief, taking a form of headhunting in the Ilongot community. This practice and response to grief may seem barbaric or even unacceptable to the strata that is distant from the Ilongot community. But to them, it is their ontological reality, their way of coping, with their reasoning and emotional significance attached to it. But from here, a question arises in my mind, what if everyone started practicing this? Would this still be accepted as everyone’s own choice and their own ontological reality? I think not, because then each and every one would turn against each other, killing each other, be it to cope with a loss. Leaving the old ‘civilised’ ways behind, every reaction would be that of hurting the other fellow traveller of earth. This is what Kali intends on doing, as per the puranas and popular beliefs. Kali is destined to hijack the minds of mankind, make them turn against each other, corrupt their way of thinking and actions, ultimately plague them with a war amongst each other leading to ultimate destruction and making the evil prosper.

## **RELATING KALI TO MODERN DAY SERIAL KILLERS**

Foucault, in his Abnormal lectures (2003), distinguishes three types of 'monster' or 'monstrosity'. Firstly, the 'human monster', which is something or someone causing anxiety by existing outside the law. Secondly, there's the 'individual needing correction' to conform to the law. Thirdly, there's the 'masturbator', a moral lawbreaker. Foucault explores the changing connections between normal, abnormal, and sexual deviance, explaining how monsters challenge morals through conduct, not nature. He emphasizes the problem of applying norms to human nature. The fusion of the concepts of the 'human monster' and the 'individual in need of correction' prompts us to consider what is deemed acceptable or preferable in both human beings and social interactions. Keeping Foucault’s distinguishes in mind, we can discuss the connection between Kali, the monster and modern-day serial killers as the human monsters.

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It is popularly believed that Kali takes over the minds of people and manipulating and deceiving them into doing wrongful, sinful and 'monstrous' deeds. It is believed that he was responsible for the wrongful acts of Ravana and Kans and other antagonists in Hindu mythology.

A powerful line in Kalki purana mentions Kali saying to Vishnu:

*"Kans, Ravan, Duryodhan, tumko nahi pehchaante the.  
Weh mere hi murkh the jo bas zidd pakadna jante the"*

This translates to "Kans, Ravan, Duryodhan, did not recognise you for what you are. They were my fools only, who only knew how to be stubborn."

Hence, it is not a lesser known fact that Kali can corrupt the hearts and mind of people and continues to do so in ways we cannot identify or imagine. This brings us to the discourse of deeds of serial killers throughout the history of mankind. Could they possibly be corrupted by Kali, as the beliefs suggests? And whether they give embodiment to the inhumane actions of Kali? Do we consider the acts of serial killers as something non-human and ultimately relating it to the greater question of Kali as a non-human figure himself?

Infamous serial killers like John Wayn Gacy who killed and raped 33 men and buried them in the concrete of his house and continued to live a 'normal life' with no regret or remorse, can be given the name of human? Upon declaring of him being sentenced to death he said while laughing "I killed 33 people and they are going to kill me once. Gacy outsmarted them again!" While he was being given a lethal injection to meet his death sentence, he uttered his last words which were "kiss my ass". Are these the actions and feelings of a human? Jeffery Dahmer, a serial killer and cannibal who murdered, engaged in necrophilia (sexual acts with dead body/parts) and quite literally devoured these men he killed. Does his acts align with what we think of actions done by humans? When we follow the trajectory of these killers, we often feel astonished of how humane they acted when they didn't perform these inhumane acts. It is, as if, in a blink they are charged by something that a non-human would do. All of us are humans, capable of feeling intense negative emotions or thoughts about hurting others but even then,

upon hearing such incidents of serial killers and mass murders we mutter to ourselves "Oh what a Monster!"

### **KALI AS A REPRESENTATION OF 'THANATOS'**

In psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud believed that all humans have some basic, primitive, unconscious instincts that influence our emotions and behaviours. These two are: life instincts called 'libido', which is the source of everything that helps us sustain life, and everything productive related to growth and liveliness. While, the death instinct is called 'thanatos', which is the source of everything that is destructive, dangerous, counterproductive and also, death. (Freud, 1920). He believed we all possess both and most dysfunctional behaviours could be made sense of by the overworking of thanatos and suppressing of libido.

Kali, can be seen as the manifestation of this death drive. Kali is everything destructive, malicious, and death itself. It is the death of good, death of bonds, connections and ultimately, the death of human (symbolic and literal). Kali makes people engage in killing of their own brothers and enemies alike, it makes people renounce their life and go down a path

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of self- destruction, it makes them hurt their own self, it makes them manipulate and bring down others, and what scriptures says: it makes them renounce god and follow the path of evil, blinded by kali's deception that, the path of destruction and evil they are following is in fact, the only truth.

### **KALI AS A PLAGUE**

Kali, a body-less entity, is able to infest the minds and hearts of mortals and move them like puppets to create a world of darkness. It wants to provoke kalki (Vishnu's last avatar) and defeat him so it can bring in the ultimate darkness. Kali's main aim and motive is to spread the wildfire of death and destruction but the blood would be on the hands of the mortals. It is like a plague, infiltrating the minds of all, spreading from one to another, without the host even realising that their mind has been infested with Kali, the plague. Spreading this plague of darkness in the minds of travellers to make them follow him, as its followers into the path of destructions.

### **KALI, THE NON-HUMAN**

From the above arguments, we can come to an encapsulated understanding that Kali is a manifestation of the characteristics that we mortals consider as non-human. Kali is described as something having a body of a human and face of a dog, a rotting smell, a king like clothing but actions like a devil. It has a body but that body is not limited to just one, it is ever changing.

Kali, the master of deception, can change its form, can infiltrate a body and mind. It can shift from one form to another. A 'human', an animal, a bird, a stone. It can be present in all and everything. Kali is thus, formless, bodiless.

Kali is something that never dies. It is something that cannot be destroyed because there is no body to kill or to capture. Its body dies when it is inside a mortal, but his soul lives on. The soul plagues another body, who is again, subjected to death, but it is it that never dies. Thus, Kali is immortal.

Kali can infiltrate like a virus, like a bug, like a small prick of wood on the hand, which can be thorn out but may leave its poison. It is like a plague that enters your mind and eats the goodness from within. It is a silent killer that one may never know about. It is what pries on the existing dark rooms in the human mind, turns it into a bigger disease. Thus, kali is infectious.

Kali is the source of the anger one feels inside, the dark thoughts we have that we never say out loud. Kali is like a weed that grows in the hearts. Kali feeds on the insecurities and doubts we possess. It manipulates and deceives the mortals into expressing the same very human emotions into an agenda of his non-humaneness. Thus, kali is the source of all evil, of all that is non-human.

Kali is itself, a haunting figure of a non-human.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present paper attempts to differentiate between what can be called as a 'human' and a 'non-human' through carefully looking at the mythological figure of Kali, the asura and relate it to present time concepts, renowned work of thinkers, to present day references. The paper begins with understanding the origin of Kali, the asura and how it relates to the understanding of non-human. It traces the deeds, the qualities that makes Kali, the non-

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human image. Connecting this to a broader understanding of the concept on non-human provides us to reach a basic characterisation of what we do not consider as human. Relating Kali to the figures of modern day serial killers provides us with a more relatable manifestation of the non- humaneness of the non-human, disguised in the physicality of human. A psychoanalytic understanding of the doings of Kali was done by drawing on the death instinct, thanatos. Moving on to describe Kali further in terms of its non-human manifestations, we see Kali as a plague, an infiltration. Using all these references, connecting them to readings of Rosaldo and Derrida, we arrive at an encapsulated understanding of what and how Kali can be seen as a figure that helps us understand the concept and characterisation of non-human.

It opens up further dialogues and questions regarding the criteria that we have set for what we call human. Is it necessary to call everything that looks and talks human but then goes on to do something that repulses most of us? To look on the other side, does every negative reaction and emotion that goes up a notch is non-human in its essence? Are we the right person to judge and draw conclusions on what we term as human and non-human? All of this leads to a greater question, just what Derrida (2002) proposed when he introduced the term "animot" to emphasize the indeterminacy between the animate (human) and the inanimate (non-human). Do we all, the prototype figures of human, possess qualities that are non-human and does the prototype non-human figures possess qualities that are human? Does anything or anyone, really sharply distinct in terms of human and non-human?

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