

The Politics of Myth, Power, Rage and Patriarchy: Feminist Interpretations of Goddess Kali

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Abstract

This article examines the figure of Goddess Kali to challenge the male-centered knowledge in mainstream International Relations (IR). Using a Critical and Standpoint Feminist IR framework, particularly the work of J. Ann Tickner, Cynthia Enloe, Sandra Harding, and V. Spike Peterson, it argues that Kali is not just a religious or cultural symbol. She represents a radical source of political knowledge that questions the gendered silences in IR.

Two connected arguments are put forward. First, Kali's imagery of rage, dissolution, and rejection of patriarchal norms undermines the rationalist, state-focused, and male-dominated nature of IR theory. Second, her figure serves as a metaphor for political agency among marginalized groups a way of knowing and resisting that the leading IR frameworks cannot truly understand.

Building on Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory and Audre Lorde's views on anger, the article claims that Kali's rage is not just an irrational outburst but a structured form of knowledge. It reflects the experiences of those systematically left out of the global order. Taking Kali seriously as a theoretical figure requires us to completely rethink the knowledge framework of IR. This new approach should include non-Western, non-rational, and emotional aspects of political experience.

Keywords: Feminist IR; Standpoint Epistemology; Kali; Subaltern Agency; Patriarchal IR; Postcolonial Feminism; Rage; Myth and IR Theory

1. Introduction: The Problem with IR's Silences

International Relations has often taken pride in its ability to explain how states behave, outline power structures, and shed light on the dynamics of war, peace, and order. However, despite its ambitious goals, IR has largely ignored half of humanity. It has been mostly blind to women's experiences, the gendered structures that uphold global order, and political knowledge that doesn't come from the Western rationalist tradition. These gaps are not accidental. They are woven into the very foundations of mainstream IR theory, helping to maintain a world order that is masculinist, Eurocentric, and focused on the state.

The main thought of this article comes not from a treaty or a battle but from an image: the Goddess Kali, standing over the body of the God Shiva, her tongue sticking out, wearing a garland of severed heads, and holding weapons in her four arms. She is dark-skinned, wild haired, and fiercely powerful. For a Western IR scholar trained in the teachings of Waltz, Morgenthau, or Mearsheimer, this image seems irrelevant just a part of South Asian religious culture, not political theory.

This article disputes that view. It argues that Kali is not only relevant to IR; she is essential for any IR that genuinely seeks to explain power, agency, resistance, and the politics of knowledge.

The main argument has three parts. First, mainstream IR is based on a masculinist way of knowing a gendered structure of knowledge that favours rationality, sovereignty, state power, and domination while systematically sidelining emotion, physical presence, and non-Western ways of knowing. Second, the figure of Goddess Kali poses a significant symbolic and theoretical challenge to this way of knowing. Her imagery and stories convey a political language of anger, breakdown, resistance, and non-rational political force that goes beyond the discipline's current vocabulary. Third, and most importantly, Kali's anger serves as a form of subaltern political knowledge: a way of understanding the world from a place of exclusion that demands acknowledgment as a valid form of political knowledge.

2. Feminist IR and the Patriarchal Canon

2.1 The Emergence of Feminist IR

The entry of feminist scholarship into International Relations represents one of the discipline's most significant epistemological disruptions. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw interventions that fundamentally challenged IR's foundational assumptions. Tickner's *Gender in International Relations* (1992) and Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1990) are watershed texts, arguing that mainstream IR's core concepts power, security, autonomy, rationality were not gender-neutral descriptions of political reality but masculinist constructs encoding a historically specific and deeply gendered understanding of political life.

Enloe's contribution was to ask a deceptively simple question: where are the women? This question revealed the extent to which women's labour, bodies, and experiences were not merely absent from IR theory but actively constitutive of the international system that IR theorised. The 'international,' Enloe showed, was sustained, reproduced, and made possible by gendered relations that IR's theoretical frameworks had systematically rendered invisible.

2.2 Standpoint Epistemology and Postcolonial Feminism

Standpoint epistemology, developed by Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock before being applied to IR by Tickner and V. Spike Peterson, rests on the insight that knowledge is always situated that what we know and how we come to know it is shaped by our position within social relations of power. When applied to IR, this yields a powerful critical tool: if mainstream IR theory reflects the standpoint of particular social actors Western, male, elite, state-associated then its apparent universality is an illusion, and its silences are not neutral but political.

Peterson deepens Tickner's epistemological critique by demonstrating that IR's tripartite division of politics into international, national, and domestic corresponds to a gendered hierarchy in which the international is masculine, the national ambiguously gendered, and the domestic feminine that is not merely descriptive but normative, shaping what counts as genuinely political.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' poses a question central to this article's concerns: within colonial and postcolonial discourse, can the most radically marginalised subject achieve genuine political voice? Spivak's answer is disturbingly negative. This article engages with her argument not to accept its conclusion but to question it through the figure of Kali. What if the subaltern does not speak in the register IR recognises as speech? What if she screams? Kali represents precisely this kind of utterance one that IR, in its current form, simply cannot hear.

3. Kali: Myth, Power, and the Politics of the Uncontainable

3.1 Origins and Iconography

Kali's earliest textual appearances are in the *Devi Mahatmya* (c. fifth–sixth century CE), where she emerges from the brow of the warrior goddess Durga literally born from divine rage to destroy demon armies that Durga alone cannot defeat. She falls upon them with an appetite that knows no restraint, swallowing demons whole, drinking their blood before it touches the ground. The narrative is politically rich: Kali is not merely a destroyer but a necessary destroyer, arising now when conventional political solutions have failed. Her violence is structurally necessary only through a force that exceeds ordinary political calculation can the demonic cycle be interrupted.

Kali's iconography constitutes a complex symbolic system encoding a political grammar radically at odds with mainstream IR. Her dark skin associated in Sanskrit aesthetics with the formless and infinite marks her as that which exceeds all categorisation, all neat distinctions upon which political order depends. Her garland of fifty-two severed human heads, representing the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, suggests a relationship to language and cognition not of rational mastery but of radical supersession. She has gone beyond the categories through which ordinary political reality is organised. Her standing on the body of Shiva in Shaiva theology the masculine principle of pure awareness encodes the triumph of active, embodied, affective power over passive, abstract, disembodied consciousness.

3.2 Feminist Theological Readings

Feminist theologians have been among the most productive interpreters of Kali's political significance. Lina Gupta argues that Kali represents a form of divine power fundamentally at odds with patriarchal religion's domesticated feminine the good mother, the chaste wife, the beautiful consort. Kali is none of these things. She is the goddess who refused domestication: she does not cook, she does not clean, she does not smile reassuringly. She destroys. Rita DasGupta Sherma similarly identifies Kali as the 'transgressive sacred feminine' a dimension of divine feminine power that patriarchal religion has consistently attempted to contain, subordinate, or reframe. The history of Kali's reception is in large part a history of these containment strategies.

4. Kali as Subversive Symbol Against Patriarchal IR

4.1 Against State centric IR

Kali is, first and most fundamentally, uncontainable by any political institution. She does not operate through states, governments, or recognised political structures she arises precisely when institutional political power has exhausted its resources. Her political agency is extra-institutional, transgressive of the boundaries that define legitimate political action within the state centric framework. But Kali's challenge is more radical than a simple argument for the inclusion of non-state actors. She does not merely operate outside the state she dissolves the boundaries through which the state constitutes itself.

The state depends for its existence on maintaining distinctions: inside and outside, citizen and alien, legitimate violence and illegitimate violence, order and chaos. Kali collapses these distinctions. She operates in the cremation ground the liminal space between life and death, purity and pollution, the social and its beyond which is precisely the space the ordered political community must exclude to constitute itself. In occupying the cremation ground, Kali occupies the constitutive outside of political order, revealing that what appears as order is always constituted against a suppressed chaos and that the suppressed chaos has its own intelligence, its own power, its own claims.

4.2 Against the Rationality Assumption

If there is a single dimension of mainstream IR that Kali most dramatically subverts, it is the rationality assumption. From Morgenthau's rational statesman to Waltz's billiard-ball states to game-theoretic models of neoliberal institutionalism, IR is saturated with a conception of political agency as rational, calculating, means-ends oriented, and fundamentally non-emotional. Kali is not rational. She is in a state of divine frenzy a condition that exceeds rational control. And yet she is effective: she accomplishes what rational, calculating political agents could not.

Audre Lorde's argument in 'The Uses of Anger' is instructive here: emotions are not merely subjective states that interfere with rational political judgment but are themselves a form of political intelligence, irreducible to rational calculation. Kali's divine frenzy is, in this reading, not irrationality but supra-rationality a mode of political intelligence that exceeds what rational calculation can achieve.

4.3 Against Domination Models of Power

Kali's power is not power-as-domination the capacity to compel others to act in accordance with one's preferences. It is, rather, power-as-dissolution: a form of power that does not seek to control or possess but to transform, to break down, to return to formlessness. She is the power that undoes power the force that dissolves the structures through which domination is exercised. This resonates powerfully with Peterson's 'emancipatory power' and Enloe's 'feminist curiosity,' both pointing toward forms of political power that feminist IR has been trying to theorise a force that does not seek to take over existing structures of power but to dissolve them, opening space for something genuinely new.

5. Rage and Subaltern Agency: Kali as Political Epistemology

5.1 The Politics of Anger

Anger is among the most politically fraught of all emotions. In dominant political discourse, anger is consistently treated as a sign of irrationality, of loss of control, of political illegitimacy. Yet, as feminist theorists from Audre Lorde to Gayatri Spivak have powerfully argued, this dismissal of anger is itself a deeply political act one that systematically delegitimises the political expression of those who have the most to be angry about.

Lorde's essay 'The Uses of Anger' remains one of the most incisive analyses of anger's political function. She argues that anger at the experience of oppression is not a distortion of political perception but a sharpening of it. Tickner's standpoint feminist framework deepens this analysis: if knowledge is always situated, then anger is not a distortion of political perception but a sharpening of it. To demand that marginalised people set their anger aside in the interests of rational deliberation is to demand they suppress the very knowledge that gives their political speech its authority the precise mechanism by which IR's masculinist epistemology operates.

5.2 Kali's Rage as Political Epistemology

Kali is, above all, a goddess of rage. Not the controlled, purposive anger of the strategic political actor, but the total, overwhelming rage of one who has been pushed past all limits. Yet, as established above, her rage is not random it arises in response to a specific political emergency, it accomplishes what more measured strategies could not, and it does so through a form of total political commitment that exceeds the calculative logic of rational political agency.

This article argues that Kali's rage constitutes a form of political epistemology a way of knowing the political world irreducible to rational calculation. In its representational sense, her rage figures the accumulated fury of all those systematically excluded from the world order, whose agency has been

dismissed and whose suffering has been rendered invisible. In its epistemological sense, her rage is itself a mode of political knowledge that carries genuine cognitive content and political validity one that Tickner's standpoint feminism and Spivak's postcolonial theory both equip us to recognise.

5.3 The Subaltern Who Screams

Spivak's question can the subaltern speak? becomes, considering Kali, a different question: can the subaltern scream? This article argues that Spivak's pessimistic answer forecloses too quickly on the possibility of political utterance that does not take the form of rational speech within recognised institutions. Kali's scream operates outside the register of rational deliberation. It asserts its presence through an excess that breaks the frame of ordinary political discourse. The refugee who throws herself against the border fence is not making an argument in the language of international human rights law, but she is making a political claim. Kali is the theoretical figure for all forms of political utterance that IR, in its current form, cannot properly hear.

6. The Co-optation Problem: Patriarchy's Kali

Any argument for Kali's subversive political potential must confront an obvious objection: if Kali is so threatening to patriarchal order, why has she been so consistently incorporated into it? The history of Kali's reception within Hindu religious traditions, in colonial discourse, and in contemporary Hindutva nationalism is full of attempts to contain, domesticate, and co-opt her subversive energy.

Within Hindu religious tradition, the dominant containment strategy has been her incorporation into Shaiva theology as the consort and ultimately the subordinate of Shiva. The standard devotional explanation of Kali standing on Shiva that she suddenly realises she is standing on her husband and stops in shame is a particularly striking example: the image of feminine power triumphant over masculine order is reinterpreted as a moment of wifely shame and self-correction.

British colonial engagement constructed Kali as a symbol of Indian religious barbarism, deployed to justify imperial governance. Hindu nationalism subsequently appropriated her as a symbol of militant national identity her rage directed not against patriarchal order but against religious minorities. In Hindutva ideology, Kali's genuine affective force is mobilised while being redirected toward the reproduction of exactly the exclusionary, masculinist nationalism that feminist IR theory is committed to critiquing.

Yet the persistence and variety of these co-optation attempts testify, paradoxically, to the genuine political force of what Kali represents. Drawing on James Scott's theorisation of hidden transcripts and Chantal Mouffe's work on hegemony and counterhegemony: the counter-hegemonic imagination does not need to be contained if it poses no genuine threat. The fact that patriarchal power has devoted such sustained effort to domesticating Kali across Brahminical theology, colonial discourse, and contemporary nationalism is evidence that there is something in the figure of Kali that patriarchal order cannot simply ignore.

7. Conclusion: What Kali Teaches IR

This article has argued that the figure of Goddess Kali constitutes a profound theoretical intervention into the masculinist epistemology of mainstream International Relations. It has established that mainstream IR is built on a gendered epistemic architecture that systematically silences non-Western, non-rational, and affective forms of political knowledge. It has analysed Kali's mythological and iconographic grammar through a feminist political lens, demonstrating that her principal symbolic features her rage, her dissolution of boundaries, her occupation of liminal spaces, her refusal of domestication encode a political

grammar radically incompatible with mainstream IR's core categories. And it has theorised Kali's rage as a form of subaltern political epistemology that IR must learn to hear.

Taking Kali seriously demands at minimum three things of IR as a discipline. First, IR must expand its epistemological imagination beyond the Western rationalist tradition a demand feminist IR scholar have been making for three decades without adequate response. Second, IR must develop a political theory of rage, treating it not as an obstacle to rational political deliberation but as a form of political knowledge. Third, IR must take mythology and symbolism seriously as sites of political knowledge production not abandoning empirical rigour but recognising that the imagination is itself a form of political knowledge, and that myth is a sophisticated, politically charged form of collective imagination that IR ignores at its peril.

This article ends where it began: with the image of Kali standing on Shiva's body, wild-haired and laughing. For the mainstream IR theorist, this image is simply illegible a symbol from another register of political meaning that the discipline's conceptual vocabulary cannot accommodate. That is precisely the point. The illegibility of Kali to mainstream IR is not a fact about Kali it is a fact about IR. If the discipline is to become adequate to the political realities of the twenty-first century, it must find a way to hear what Kali is saying. She has been saying it for centuries. The question is whether IR is finally ready to listen.