

# Being Experienced By and Experiencing the Divine: An Interplay of Womanist and Shakta Traditions



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**Preeta M. Banerjee**

## Abstract

This paper offers an introduction to the intersection of Womanist and Shakta traditions by exploring the relationship between “us experiencing the Divine” and “the Divine experiencing us.” Having noted that Alice Walker defined the term Womanism in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), this paper compares Walker’s poem “There is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me” to the Bangla Shama Sangeet (or Ma Kali devotional song) “Mayer Payer Jaba Hoye” by Ramprasad Sen (a Shakta poet of Bengal). It suggests that grappling these pieces can lead to a mystical experience that opens us up to the ability of our sense organs beyond seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching the Divine. This experience moves us beyond dualistic perspectives and false dichotomies to multiple ways of being. From this interplay, we come to grasp the Divine as the Dark Mother in all her forms.

## Keywords

Womanist, Shakta, Alice Walker, Ma Kali, Ramprasad Sen, Pannalal Bhattacharya, Dark Mother, Sanskrit

To the Divine Goddess who resides in all existence  
in the form of the universal mother,  
We bow to her, we bow to her,  
continually we bow to her.  
—*Devi Stuti*<sup>1</sup>

What might we find at the intersection of Womanist and Shakta traditions? Before we enter the sacred space of beginning to answer the question, I must acknowledge that I write this piece in

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<sup>1</sup> Verse 1 of the *Devi Stuti*. Cheever Mackenzie Brown, *The Devi Gita: The Song of the Goddess: A Translation, Annotation, and Commentary* (SUNY Press, 1998).

honor of my mentor, Dr. Lucinda Mosher, having based it on my final post-doctoral presentation under her direction. Entitled “Alice Walker and the Dark Mother,” that project led me to an insight that Shakta traditions, as streams of the Hindu faith, are not seen fully for their activist lens, whereas Womanist traditions, as defined by Alice Walker, are seen primarily as an alternative to feminist activism and not seen fully for its spiritual tradition.<sup>2</sup> Yet, Shakta and Womanist traditions both offer views of the Divine as the Dark Mother that help us move from a dualistic perception toward a sense that everything is Spirit. This insight has potential to inform how we act in our daily lives. Both traditions can move us to resting places where humans, plants, animals, earth, water, and air are all connected. Thus, both traditions foster spirituality and social impact in their respective ways.

In answering the question of what we might find in an exploration of the intersection of Womanist and Shakta traditions, I take a cue from biology (one of my areas of undergraduate studies). Just as in biology, we look at the molecular level to understand the organism, here we will look at cells within each tradition to get a better understanding of how these two important lineages can inform and expand us individually and collectively. From Shakta traditions, we look at the Bangla Shama Sangeet (Ma Kali devotional song) “Mayer Payer Jaba Hoye” by Ramprasad Sen (a Shakta poet of Bengal), as sung by Pannalal Bhattacharya.<sup>3</sup> From Womanist traditions, I explore Alice Walker’s poem, “There is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me,” published as a children’s book of the same title.<sup>4</sup>

## **Comparative Theology**

This exploration is done as an interplay, a comparative theology of sorts, between Shakta and Womanist traditions as “religions”—where the term *religion* refers to the distinctive set of rituals, beliefs, doctrines, institutions, and practices that enable members of a particular tradition to establish, maintain, and celebrate a meaningful world.<sup>5</sup> The process of comparative theology offers a way, as Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen writes, “to gain better understanding.”<sup>6</sup> In the words of Francis X. Clooney, unlike more neutral and objective exercises in comparison, comparative theology “marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions.”<sup>7</sup> Further, as Keith Ward writes, “there is a tradition at the very heart of [many living] faiths which is held common. It is not that precisely the same doctrines are believed, but that the same tendencies of thought and devotion exist, and are expressed with rather diverse patterns of thought, characteristic of the faiths in question.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Preeta Banerjee, “Alice Walker and the Dark Mother,” presented at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace on April 14, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Pannalal Bhattacharya, “Mayer Payer Jaba Hoye” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Faem9SIcCjI> (accessed March 6, 2024)

<sup>4</sup> Alice Walker, *There is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> H. Byron Earhart, *Religious Traditions of the World: A Journey Through Africa, Mesoamerica, North America, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, China, and Japan* (New York: Harper, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Keith Ward, *Images of Eternity: Concepts of God in Five Religious Traditions* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 1998), 1.

Yet, as Lucinda Mosher says in her description of religious manyness and pluralism, “we can’t help but view, hear, and understand the religious other from our own religious perspective. We always stand somewhere when we meet; we always start at a location when we move. No matter how open-minded we are, we assess the truth and beauty of another religion according to our (rather than its) criteria.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, let me begin with the stance of Shakta traditions as a born-into-practitioner and burgeoning scholar.

I preface my explorations as introductory, acknowledging my representations may seem flatter than that of a long-time expert academic. Moreover, my lived experience is rooted in the particulars of reclaiming my ancestral knowledge lost through needing to assimilate and show economic value in the Western world. This does not excuse any omissions or lacks and hopefully gains some grace on the reader’s part. Also, please note that each Sanskrit word can have ten to thirty different meanings, and many are not directly translatable.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, I hope you, as the reader, find curiosity in different versions of Sanskrit (and Bengali) references, spellings, translations, and transliterations.

## Shakta Traditions

My explorations of the Shakta traditions are rooted in my own upbringing of the ritual practices, tied to the annual worship of Ma Durga during Durga Puja, a ten-day observance during the lunar Hindu calendar month of Ashvin, which coincides with the months of September and October of the Roman calendar. In East India, particularly Kolkata, the celebrations begin on the first day, *Mahalaya*, with a 4:00 AM All-India program: *Mahishasura Mardini*. Broadcasted live since 1931, a recording of the ninety-minute audio montage of the *Chandi Pat* along with Bengali devotional songs, classical music, and acoustics, has been available since 1966. It is in recurring aural experience of that recording that my faith upbringing has been grounded to date.<sup>11</sup>

To provide more academic grounding to such rooted experiences, I turned primarily to scholars Neela Bhattacharya Saxen, Raj Balkaran, Pravina Rodrigues, and Rita D. Sherma.<sup>12</sup> A similar process to my own of linking ritualistic practice to theology and scripture is eloquently articulated by Zipei Tang:

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<sup>9</sup> Lucinda Allen Mosher, *Praying: The Rituals of Faith* (New York: Seabury, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Rajiv Malhotra and Satyanarayana Dasa Babaji, *Sanskrit Non-translatables: The Importance of Sanskritizing English* (Delhi: Amaryllis, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Please note, as mentioned before, that there are many other scriptures to which Shaktas (those who align with Shakti) turn, including various Upanishads and the Devi Gita (also known as Devi Bhagavatam, Bhagavata Purana, Srimad Bhagavatam and Srimad Devi Bhagavatam). In addition to turning to scripture, there are other practices that align with Shakti.

<sup>12</sup> See particularly, Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, *Absent Mother God of the West: A Kali Lover's Journey Into Christianity and Judaism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015); Raj Balkaran, “Visions and revisions of the Hindu goddess: Sound, structure, and artful ambivalence in the Devī Māhātmya,” *Religions*, Vol. 10, no. 5 (2019): 322; Pravina Rodrigues, *A Sakta Method for Comparative Theology: Upside-Down Inside-Out* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024); and Rita D. Sherma, “Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the Flavors of Bhakti,” *Beacons of Dharma: Spiritual Exemplars for the Modern Age*, eds. Christopher Patrick Miller, Michael Reading, and Jeffery D. Long, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 41–60.

The mystical and theological idea of divine feminine can be found as early as in the ancient *R̥g Veda*. Throughout the development of Indian civilization, the divine feminine has always held a significant position in the collective consciousness of the Indian people. Her presence is found in iconography, legends and lore, music, and artworks. Philosophical concepts of the feminine principles such as *Māyā* (the cosmological power of “measurement” that creates the appearance of the universe), *Prakṛti* (materiality), and *Śakti* (divine energy/power), which are indispensable to various schools of thought such as *Advaita Vedānta*, *Sāṃkhya*, and Tantra, are assimilated by *Śākta* tradition into one form—*Mahādevī* (or simply *Devī*). *Mahādevī* is the divine mother or the Great Goddess who embodies the ultimate reality or Brahman. Primary practices in *Śākta* tradition include *pūjā* (ritual worship), festival celebrations such as Navratri and Diwali, and pilgrimage to sacred *Śākta* sites. Pilgrimage sites are called the *Śakti Pīṭhas* or “seats of *Śakti*”; according to legends, these sites contain various body parts of *Devī*.<sup>13</sup>

In short, the Divine Feminine, known as Shakti/*Śakti*, is the primordial cosmic energy that represents the dynamic forces which move through the entire cosmos.<sup>14</sup> The alignment of the individual to the creative forces of Shakti is not exclusive to Shaivism, Vaishnavism, or Smartism—all of which speak strongly of moving into spaces of interconnectedness (and illustrates much of the problem that I have had in using exact academic terminology and language to explore this interplay of traditions). In other words, devoting oneself to, or venerating, Shakti can be practiced in tandem with other types of alignment, such as other dharmic or Hindu traditions. Nevertheless, to align with Shakti is to focus on the Divine Feminine in one’s beliefs or practices.

It should be noted that the way I am discussing the Divine Feminine should not be confused with movements variously labeled New Age or Theosophical—or any politicized, gendered form.<sup>15</sup> As a practitioner, I use Ma in front of the name of the Goddess. Over 5,000 years of tradition can be found in reverence of the Mother as providing the three essential functions of overseeing the universe, inspiring creation, and compelling destruction. She may exist in *nirguṇa* form, as an ocean of consciousness, or in *saguṇa* form, as a particular Goddess (in the form of Ma Kali, Ma Durga, Ma Lakshmi). Thus, aligning oneself with the primordial force of the Divine Feminine can be akin to human flourishing as expressed by Clooney, where he contrasts religions built around salvation and those built around flourishing, where flourishing occurs from an inner dynamic of growth with no need for interference from the outsider: “Hindu goddess traditions are very much traditions of flourishing.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Zipei Tang, “Reciprocal Interaction Between Śākta Theology and Ritual Praxis—a Study of Caṇḍī Pūjā and Devī Māhātmya in the Devī Mandir Community of Shree Maa,” *Journal of Dharma Studies*, Vol. 4, no. 3 (2021), 296.

<sup>14</sup> See Usha Chatterji’s “Shakta and Shakti” in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 2, no. 4 (Autumn, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> To learn more about Theosophy and its origins in colonial Calcutta, please listen to Mriganka Mukhopadhyay, *Rejected Religion Podcast: Illuminating the Obscure*, Episode 15, Part 2: “Voices from Within: An Indian Perspective on the Theosophical Society in 19<sup>th</sup> c. Calcutta,” (September 24, 2021), <https://rejected-religion-introductory-episode-1-what-do-i-mean-by.simplecast.com/episodes/rr-pod-e15-p2-mriganka-mukhopadhyay-voices-from-within-an-indian-perspective-on-the-theosophical-society-in-19th-c-calcutta> (accessed March 2, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Francis X. Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

As mentioned above, there are a variety of ways to engage in alignment with Shakti, including worship through puja, reading scriptures, singing hymns, chanting, dancing, writing poetry, and meditation. There are also a variety of times during the year when these practices are engaged. One scripture of the Shakta tradition is the *Devi Mahatmya* (*devīmāhātmyam*, literally “Glory of the Goddess”) practiced in the form of reciting the *Durgā Saptashatī/Chandi Path* (chapters 83–91 of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*). The reading is interwoven with a flow of more contemporary songs that will lead to the One through the cosmic energy of Shakti.

Thus, from Shakta traditions, we look at the Bangla Shama Sangeet (devotional song to Ma Kali) *Mayer Payer Jaba Hoye*. This song was written by Ramprasad Sen (1718–1785) from Bengal. One of the most prominent Shakta poets, he wrote more than 300 Shakta lyrical poems.<sup>17</sup> I have in mind this song as sung by Pannalal Bhattacharya (1930–1966), cited above. He developed a special style of singing, filled with devotion to Mother Kali, that I came to love as a child.

### Seeing Womanism in a Comparative Theological Frame

My explorations of Womanist traditions involve watching movies, reading books, and attending workshops, seminars, and book discussions by Womanist theologians; that is, I engage the Womanist traditions as a scholar-practitioner.<sup>18</sup> In a comparative light, Womanist traditions, similar to Shakta traditions, provides a distinctive set of rituals, beliefs, doctrines, institutions, and practices that enable members of a particular tradition to establish, maintain, and celebrate a meaningful world. Helping me to articulate this position are Layli Maparyan’s explanation of the metaphysical architecture of the womanist idea, reflections by Nagueyalti Warren on Alice Walker’s ideas, and Pamela B. June’s explanation of Walker’s insights on the interconnection of all beings.<sup>19</sup> Womanism as a stance was defined by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. As she uses the term, it refers to women of color, particularly Black women, who embrace their audaciousness, their deep appreciation of other women, and their commitment to “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.” For Walker, Womanism means “a black feminist or feminist of color;” but she also says that “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sudeshna Saha Roy, “The Rise of Shyama Sangeet in Bengal: Domestication of the Ferocious Kali through Songs” in *South Asian Research Journal of Arts, Language, and Literature*, Vol. 3, no. 5 (September–October 2021): 61–67.

<sup>18</sup> As a Clinical Pastoral Education student under Dr. Irie Session, one of the authors of *The Gathering: A Womanist Church* (2020), I have received affirmation that, when Alice Walker defined Womanism, she specifically included all women of color; and that, furthermore, I abide by her published Womanist Ethical Praxis, which includes four tenets regarding that Womanists Affirm Subjective Reality, Womanists Cultivate Self-Compassion, Womanists Utilize Systematic Curiosity, and Womanists Value Social Cohesion. Hence, as an Indian American woman, I apply this label to myself legitimately.

<sup>19</sup> See Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Nagueyalti Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); and Pamela B. June, *Solidarity with the Other Beings on the Planet: Alice Walker, Ecofeminism, and Animals in Literature* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of My Mother's Garden: Womanist Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xii.

According to Nagueyalti Warren, Alice Walker's essays, poetry, novels, children's books, nonfiction, and fiction reveal a deep metaphysical and spiritual essence.<sup>21</sup> For example, in her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Color Purple*, Walker's protagonist Celie writes letters to a masculine God in the sky until her love of Shug and her lived experiences help her to see an alternative: "The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else."<sup>22</sup> This strand of Walker's spiritual influence can be seen in books like Melanie Harris's *Ecowomanism*.<sup>23</sup> Deeper tenets of womanism appear in "the Gospel of Shug," which can be found in *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker's sequel to *The Color Purple*. One such tenet is this: "HELPED are those who love the Earth, their mother, and who willingly suffer that she may not die; in their grief over her converse with trees."<sup>24</sup> In "What That Day was Like for Me"—an essay inspired by the Million Man March—which Walker included in her book *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, she speaks to this expansion, saying, "As I see it black men have a deep desire to relearn their own loveliness."<sup>25</sup> Such is the way of seeing the Divine as the Dark Mother—all around us, in all beings and in all things.

### A Comparative Theological Look at Two Poems in Three Parts

Maparyan asserts that "luxocracy" (rule by light) is the animating idea of womanism, predicated upon the acknowledgment of the innate divinity and sacredness of all creation and the entire cosmos.<sup>26</sup> In this light, I discern delightful resonance between Alice Walker's poem, "There is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me," and the devotional song "Mayer Payer Jaba Hoye" as sung by Pannalal Bhattacharya. Let us look comparatively at the beginning, middle, and ending of these two poems across three areas of meaning-making.

The *Shama Sangeet* begins:

At my mother's feet, let me bloom like a *jaba* (hibiscus) flower.  
I know the jasmine flower spreads lots of sweet odor,  
but I wish to be close to you and not leave my home.

The first line of Walker's poem is its eponymous title: "There is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me."<sup>27</sup> The stanza's next three lines (constructed in parallel fashion) poetically express similar mutually enfolding relationships between subject and object: the sky sees the person gazing at the sky, a road walks the person whose foot is upon the road, and a dog holds the

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<sup>21</sup> See Nagueyalti Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1982), 193.

<sup>23</sup> Melanie L. Harris, "Alice Walker and the Emergence of Ecowomanist Spirituality" in Timothy Hessel-Robinson, ed., *Spirit and Nature: The Study of Christian Spirituality in a Time of Ecological Urgency* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 236. See also, Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*.

<sup>27</sup> For the full version of this poem, see Alice Walker, *There Is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me* (HarperCollins, 2006).

person holding the pet's leash.<sup>28</sup> In each, there is action, but the action's source and recipient (the narrator) are the reverse of what is usually expected. In both openings, we embrace the embodied power of being experienced and experiencing the Divine. She, whether in the form of Ma Kali or the animated objects being presented by the poem-author (flower, sky, road, dog), is immediately identified as something longed for and enjoyed.

The *Shama Sangeet* continues:

I know that like you there is no other to converse.  
I therefore fear that I might fall into a trap of temptations  
and lose you and fall into poverty.  
Then I remember never to forget that my mother is all merciful Divine;  
Her dark form and blood red feet removes all darkness and fear.  
And so I rest in the saying of that.

Walker's poem continues with references to the narrator being swum by the ocean, being praised by the sunrise, being tasted by the ocean-water, being sung, being danced.<sup>29</sup> Both the *Shama Sangeet* and Walker's poem enable the listener to rest in the experience and all that arises in these dynamic relationships. Both poems end where they began: in witnessing, telling, singing, and expressing the experiencing of, and being experienced by, the Divine.

### **“Being Experienced” Multidimensionally**

When reading these two pieces through a comparative theological lens, it is helpful to have as a resting place a word that expresses the simultaneity of experiencing the Divine and the Divine experiencing us. That word is Darshan—the Sanskrit word for “seeing” (*darśana*).<sup>30</sup> Darshan is a co-creative moment: seeing fosters being seen—and vice versa. Walker underscores this when she writes: “HELPEd are those who create anything at all, for they shall relive the thrill of their own conception and realize a partnership in the creation of the Universe that keeps them responsible and cheerful.”<sup>31</sup>

When reading these two pieces through a comparative theological lens, a second resting place is in the heart. In moving beyond the individual senses and their sense organs—eyes and seeing, ears and hearing, skin and touching, mouth and tasting, nose and smelling—we find that the heart is an organ of perception. This is where the experience and the Divine come together. The word often used to name this relationship is *mysticism*. While the term *mysticism* can refer to a relationship of pure ecstasy (which might occur in moments), it can also denote the humble cultivation of qualities of gratitude and love in the experience. In her writings on supplication, mysticism, and related topics, Dr. Mosher helps us understand that mysticism is not a “psychic

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<sup>28</sup> See Walker, *There is a Flower*, 3-4.

<sup>29</sup> See Walker, *There Is a Flower*, 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Light in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*.

extravagance;” rather, it is a journey in search for and in experience of a soul’s longing—a search that involves several stages (which may be named in various ways).<sup>32</sup>

The quietness of being experienced and experiencing is implied in both Walker’s poem and the *Shama sangeet*. In fact, moving meditation from mindfulness to heartfulness has shown many benefits.<sup>33</sup> We move from the dualistic mind (whatever is outside the human agent is an object that is observed, calculated, measured) to the wholeness and resonance of the heart (where the qualities of that which is beholden are perceived, grasped)—perhaps, as Cynthia Bourgeault calls it, with “the eye of the heart.”<sup>34</sup> As Walker writes: “HELPED are those who love the stranger; in this they reflect the heart of the Creator and that of the Mother.”<sup>35</sup>

A third resting place for us who are reading these two pieces through a comparative theological mode is the result of moving beyond dualities, beyond false binaries, in redefining the Divine. Ponder Alice Walker’s assertions: “*We are the African and the trader. We are the Indian and the settler. We are the slaver and the enslaved. We are the oppressor and the oppressed. We are the women and we are the men.*”<sup>36</sup> Consider that, in her poem, we can notice the similarity of the flower being experienced to the full embodiment of a flower at the Divine’s feet in the *Shama Sangeet*. Note that, even more, *we* are the Divine experiencing and being experienced by the flower.

In Hinduism, the move beyond binaries is known as *Advaita* (nondualism). Accordingly, Shakti (energy or power) and Shiv (consciousness) are given equal status and are said not to exist apart from each other. Where one exists, the other also exists. Furthermore, neither we humans nor anything else are separate from the Divine. Beyond false dichotomies, beyond dualism is only One. All else is *Maya* (illusion). Thus, we need the form to reach the formless, and any duality needs to be considered as dancing (rather than dueling) into the Oneness. As Neela Bhattacharya Saxena writes: “Taking mater/Mother out of material has left us with materialism.”<sup>37</sup> There is never a “one size fits all” solution to human religiosity because, according to the dharma worldview, we are each on unique spiritual journeys. This fuels a deep passion to see the world from profane to sacred and shift our perspectives from everything secular to spiritual.

In summary, one’s *Ishvara* (*Īśvara*, one’s personal, preferred deity) is one’s guide while moving toward moksha (human flourishing) and nirvana (a state of bliss) in one’s cyclical

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<sup>32</sup> Lucinda Allen Mosher, “Supplication as Agent and Fruit of Transformation for Bediuzzaman Said Nursi,” in Ian S. Markham and Zeyneb Sayilgan, eds., *The Companion to Said Nursi Studies* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 146–160.

<sup>33</sup> Alane Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2014). Kamlash D. Patel and Joshua Pollock, *The Heartfulness Way: Heart-based Meditations for Spiritual Transformation* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2018). Narendra Kumar Arya, et al., “Effect of Heartfulness Cleaning and Meditation on Heart Rate Variability,” *Indian Heart Journal* 70 (2018): S50–S55. Jayaram Thimmapuram, et al., “Effect of Heartfulness Meditation on Burnout, Emotional Wellness, and Telomere Length in Health Care Professionals,” *Journal of Community Hospital Internal Medicine Perspectives* 7.1 (2017): 21–27. Jayaram Thimmapuram, et al., “Heartfulness Meditation Improves Loneliness and Sleep in Physicians and Advance Practice Providers during COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Hospital Practice* 49.3 (2021): 194–202. Bhuvnesh Sankar Sylapan, et al., “Meditation, Well-being and Cognition in Heartfulness Meditators—A Pilot Study,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 86 (2020): 103032.

<sup>34</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *Eye of the Heart: A Spiritual Journey into the Imaginal Realm* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*.

<sup>36</sup> Alice Walker, *Living by the Word: Selected Writings* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, *Absent Mother God*.



existence consisting of many lifetimes. The idea is, sooner or later, the individual will have a glimpse of that liberating emptiness that will be free from religions and God. While Ma Kali might be the representative of the Dark Mother in Shaktism, Alice Walker names all the grandmothers and mothers as the Divine. Thus, Shakti is hard to name and easy to experience. She is the ever-expanding universe, the primordial force of creation. She is a mystic river that connects all the world's faiths. Dynamic figuration that changes moment to moment, attempting to capture Her is like playing hide and seek. As Walker writes: "HELPEd are those who are content to be themselves; they will never lack mystery in their lives and the joys of self-discovery will be constant."<sup>38</sup>

## **In Closing**

With Alice Walker's poem "There is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me" and the Bangla Shama Sangeet "Mayer Payer Jaba Hoye", we (the readers or listeners) *are* the Divine being experienced *and* the Divine experiencing: the Divine as the flower and being experienced by the Divine as a flower. This mystical experience opens us up to the ability of our sense organs beyond seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching the Divine. Hence, we explore (1) what it means to experience and to be the experience of *Darshan*; (2) the relationship of the experience and the Divine found in *the heart and mysticism*; (3) the redefinition of the Divine to include the Dark Earth Mother *in addition to* the Light Sky Father. From this interreligious exploration, we come to an experiential grasp of the Divine as the Dark Mother in all her forms—from the gendered, embodied to the primordial "pregnant nothingness."<sup>39</sup> As Lizelle Reymond puts it, "Shakti is a complete science...It may be divine or cosmic energy, the active and conscious force of God, the play of destruction and creation, the Divine power."<sup>40</sup>



*Preeta Banerjee, Ph.D. is the Hindu Chaplain at Tufts University and a spiritual companion who draws on a broad and deep range of experience, having spent over 20 years in academia, coaching and consulting as an advocate, educator, researcher, and author. Her passion lies in creating brave spaces at the intersection of contemplation, activism, and healing and deepening in interreligious manyness, from a lens rooted in bhakti, gyan, karma, and raj yog. She has a PhD in Strategic Management from the Wharton School; a BS in Computational Biology and Business from Carnegie Mellon; and her Graduate Certificate in Interreligious Studies from Hartford International University for Religion and Peace.*

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<sup>38</sup> Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*.

<sup>39</sup> Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, *Absent Mother God*.

<sup>40</sup> Lizelle Reymond, *Shakti: A Spiritual Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).