

Kali Narrative: Creativity in Crisis

By Shilpa Darivemula and Tanvi Gandhi

Om kreem kalika-yai namaha

(I bow my head to Mother Kali, Destroyer of Illusion)

Creativity in crises is the medicine of Mahakali

She is the innate strength of feminine within

She is in the destructive energy of chemotherapy

She unveils space of vulnerability

She is radical transformation and game changer of old into new

Surrendering to the Vital Force or Will Power is the deepest wisdom of Mahakali

Too often in medicine, we forget the parallels between our mythologies and our realities. Sometimes, the connections we recall can remind us of the innate strength within, the power and cost of healing, and the journey each patient facing cancer makes on their own. The space of vulnerability has the ability to transform the old narrative into new. We are grateful to share the space with you.

Emily. She was eighteen and her eyes were bright green. She looked completely out of place in the chemotherapy suite, with her soccer jersey, cleats, and a cold cap covering the small wisps of golden hair. The IV would be inserted and within moments, the chemotherapy treatment for her granulosa cell tumor would start to infuse into her veins and search for the most rapidly dividing cells.

Raktabija, the Blood Seed. Years prior per Hindu mythology, he had been a devout follower of a god named Shiva. After years of penance, he received a boon and asked for a special blessing. Thrilled with her penance, the God Shiva grants him his wish. Anytime a drop of his blood touched the Earth, he was reborn in full form. The power soon became all-consuming and the other Gods were unable to keep the peace. He and his followers began ravaging the forests, drying the rivers and looting the resources. Cancer—the blood seeds from which new cancers grew—spread through the body of the world, uncontrolled, unaware and all-consuming. The

Gods fell to their knees and per the *Devi Mahatmya*, goddesses named the Matrika sprang into action battling Raktabija on the battlefield.

Bleomycin-Ambika. Etoposide-Vaishnavi. Cisplatin-Durga. The regiment for battle takes turns attacking the Blood Seed's army. Each battle would start with high spirits. Emily would be smiling, walking, with her green eye glinting as she shared how she has tried to ask her friend to go with her to her senior prom. He was awkward and she figured he would never ask. She proudly shared how she confidently cornered him after class and jokingly said "One of us needs to have fancy hair for prom." He had said yes and she and her sister were planning what dress she would wear. The troops from the battle for the world—for the body—would end at dusk. The fire from the regiment burned some of their own as well. By day 2, we could see Emily change. She would crave bagels but only eat a spoon of food before vomiting. Her body hunched over and she could barely sit up. We would check her lungs and her feet daily for side effects as her parents sat by her bedside and held her hand. The Blood Seed's army grew as each drop of blood fell to the earth and a new demon sprang up. The spread was overwhelming the drugs. The battle raged within her body, but we could see she was tired. The Goddesses, the Matrikas, soon became desperate and meditated. From the eye of a goddess named Durga grew the feared and revered goddess Kali.

In Hindu-Tantric scriptures and sutras, when gods and humans and living beings are in danger or trouble, Mahamaya, The Great Shakti, Universal Mother is always called upon. She may take different forms as Mahavidyas but always begin with Mahakali, The Dark Goddess. Yoni Mudra or the downward-facing triangle shape also known as yantra embodies her energy in the Pelvic area also known as Root Chakra, Muladhara. The trident is her tool; the skull necklace is her decoration. She holds the human head in her hand, representing the shattering of ego, old identity. Her tongue is out and red. She is depicted as standing on Shiva, and the only way to calm her is to ground humbly into the earth. In the narrative of Mahakali, she is a representation of fear, dark, death, suffering and shakti to deal or overcome. Her wisdom is the ability to end, exhale, cleanse to create space for new beginnings. She is timeless, beyond time and space. Kali entered the battlefield, her large tongue rolling, her ink-colored skin shining, the skull necklace sparkling in the light. She saw Raktabija battling two goddesses and rode her tiger to meet him. Source Control.

With her trident, she stabs Raktabija. Blood spatters and from each cell—each seed—rises a new Raktabija. Emily has a chemotherapy reaction and requires fluids and Benadryl. The battle is at its climax. Kali tries again and more demons grow. Realization dawns and this time, she throws her javelin, mortally wounding the demon. As his blood falls to Earth, she extends her tongue and prevents contact. Kali continues to battle Raktabija as his forces and her goddesses vanish. Again, she swirls her sword towards him. Another wound. Blood caught on her tongue. Raktabija's laughter stops and he becomes furious. Emily vomits and closes her eyes. The next infusion starts running. It was her last day for this cycle. Blow by blow, Raktabija watches his growth cease. Kali grows larger, more powerful, and with one final attack, beheads the demon. Optimal response.

We round on Emily the next morning, her body recuperating from the loss of bystanders, a stalling of growth to stall malignancy. She opens an eye when we ask her how her night was.

She smiles and tries to show us her dress choice for prom. Her mother pats her on the back, asking her to rest. Kali, the chemotherapy, dissolves from the battlefield, as one drop of blood remains behind, awaiting the next cycle.

Narrative Medicine offers a powerful outlet for physicians and providers to tap into their creative potential and prevent possible burn-out in healthcare. Storytelling allows vulnerability to be expressed creatively. Holding space for the vulnerability allows these stories to unfold and bearing witness to the stories of healing can offer a potential opening of hope, new narrative, new pathways of healing and well-being. The ancient mythological narratives of Divine Feminine offer an important pivoting to reframe vulnerability for social, racial and gender-related crises of the current times. We intend to bridge mysticism in medicine and rethink vulnerability, for compassionate and holistic care in Women's health and well-being.

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Tanvi Gandhi has a doctorate in Naturopathic Medicine, and practices as a Licensed Acupuncturist in CT and NY. Her background is in Microbiology, Immunology, and Genetics from UCLA, and did her research internship at the National Institutes of Health. She is the founder of Shiva-Shakti Acupuncture and Ayurveda and considers herself a bridge between ancient healing wisdom and modern integrative medicine. Dr. Gandhi has her private practice and also a Wellness Consultant for Transitional Living Program at Silver Hill Hospital. She is also a part-time faculty for Integrative and Holistic Health at the Graduate Institute and is continuing her professional training in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University. She is passionate about infusing creative methods to facilitate wellness and currently a fellow at the AseemKala initiative.

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