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Book Review: "Interpreting Ramakrishna: Kali's Child Revisited"

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Interpreting Ramakrishna: Kali's Child Revisited. By Swami Tyagananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2010. 410 pages.

THE new book, *Interpreting Ramakrishna*, is a cautionary tale, a demonstration of what one should not do in writing a biography. At one level it is a class in informal logic, showing fallacies used in arguments. At another level it shows the danger of counter-transference in interpreting the experiences of other people. It is a carefully written critique of the older book *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, by Jeffrey Kripal.[1] The book *Kali's Child* was very controversial, portraying the famous Hindu saint Ramakrishna Paramahamsa of West Bengal as a traumatized survivor of sexual abuse and a frustrated homosexual. It generated international protests, partly because it won a prize from the American Academy of Religions, and thus became the major academic understanding of Ramakrishna for many universities.

Kali's Child is a psychobiography, a genre of analysis that evolved from psychoanalytic case studies. The most well-known psychobiographies are probably those by Freud and Erikson, analysts familiar with the problems of projection and transference. In the ordinary process of transference which occurs during psychoanalysis, the patient projects his or her fears and desires onto the analyst. During counter-transference, it is the analyst who projects these onto the patient. Psychoanalysts with whom I have spoken say that counter-transference is the greatest danger in the analytic process, for it distorts perception invisibly, and gets the analyst emotionally entangled with the patient. The book, *Interpreting Ramakrishna*, is in many ways a study of this process of distortion within the pages of *Kali's Child*.

Psychobiography has migrated out of analytic practice, and is now used as a form of literary theory, similar to Marxist and sociological approaches. It is often used so carelessly that the approach has become popularly known as "the maligning of exemplary figures," in which all virtues are side effects of vices, and life events are merely reactions to childhood experiences. At its worst, it can become a form of academic "yellow journalism," focusing on sex and violence, but if none is to be found, repressed sex and violence can act as a sufficient substitute.

Interpreting Ramakrishna describes how the book *Kali's Child* creates a dramatic environment suffused with an atmosphere of fear and anxiety. Like some of the commentators on Fox News, it asks incriminating questions about sexuality and violence, but does not answer them. It implies that the fear and anxiety that it describes are sexual, based on repressed events, which only the author can perceive, because only he can identify with Ramakrishna's feelings. The distortions begin with creating a charged atmosphere, in which extreme claims appear reasonable. Kripal claims special insight into Ramakrishna, understanding both his conscious mind and his unconscious drives, sympathizing with his homosexual anxieties and the "horrors of his past" (which were never mentioned in his biographies or in any other contemporary literature about him). *Kali's Child* has been criticized for its lack of historical evidence in these areas. But this is exactly the situation in any form of transference, where evidence is unnecessary because the analyst believes that he or she already knows what is going on in the mind of his subject. From this perspective, evidence does not bring forth ideas, it instead supports ideas that are already assumed.

In terms of methodological problems in *Kali's Child* the book *Interpreting Ramakrishna* identifies mistranslation (especially taking Bengali idioms literally, and using archaic or inappropriate definitions of terms from dictionaries), selective use of sources, speculations which are phrased as statements of fact, and taking ideas out of context. It gives hundreds of pages of examples of mistranslation in Kripal's book. Tyagananda and Vrajaprana describe instances of manufactured outrage (often over events for which there is no

historical evidence), the attribution of hidden motivations, claims of sympathy during character assassination, and a lack of data which is justified by claims of secrecy.

Much of the international controversy over *Kali's Child* dealt with whether or not Ramakrishna was homosexual, either in thought or action. *Interpreting Ramakrishna* has brought up broader questions of legitimate methodology. It notes the appeal to authority: Kripal based his book on previous psychoanalytic writers who found sexual pathologies in Ramakrishna, and who also characterized all forms of mysticism as regression and pathology. Kripal argues for the understanding of mystical experiences as due to pathologies and traumas, and justifies this by quoting other authors who have done so, creating a sort of lineage of Hindu mysticism as sexual pathology.

In this regard, *Interpreting Ramakrishna* noted an important issue: Kripal claimed a "fusion of mysticism and eroticism" in his interpretation of Ramakrishna, but in fact this was a false claim. Mystical trances were described in his book as ego-defenses against past traumas, so that true knowledge was the recognition of sexual desire and abuse, while mystical states were a sort of ignorance, trances which hid the truth. The secular critic is thus wiser than the saint, knowing that sexual trauma is a deeper truth than religious insight. This is not a fusion, but rather an opposition.

The closest that we see to a fusion of mysticism and eroticism is the concept that both mystical trance and repressed sexual impulses are unconscious, so they are in that sense equal. This might be something like Ken Wilber's "pre/trans fallacy," a situation in which the primitive and pre-rational becomes equated with the transcendent, as both are something different from ordinary consciousness. All non-ordinary states are lumped together as more or less equal. This is not a fusion of the mystical and the erotic; we might instead call it a confusion of the two.

Now, there is a genuine erotic mysticism in Bengali religious traditions, especially among the Vaishnavas and Sahajiyas, where the erotic *rasa* or mood is appropriate between the god as lover and the devotee as beloved. But Ramakrishna was a Shakta, a worshipper of Kali as the mother goddess. The major Shakta *rasa* is parental love between mother and child. Mixing parental and erotic *rasas* is known as a *rasabhasa*, in which *rasas* clash rather than harmonize. It is, minimally, in bad taste, and it is avoided in the Bengali Shakta art and literature which describes devotion to Kali.

Interpreting Ramakrishna also critiques the understanding of tantra in *Kali's Child,* which is entirely sexual. It is not even good sex; it is frustrated, secretive and depressing sex. I would note that Kripal's understanding of tantra is very different from that of the practicing Bengali Shakta tantrikas that I have interviewed during fieldwork. Their major concern was death, not sex. Sexuality gets in the way of meditation, and you need to control it, but death is much more significant and long-lasting. Death leads to the goddess' heaven, or to *brahmajnana*, knowledge of Brahman. The major Bengali tantric ritual is the corpse ritual, *sava-sadhana*, not sexual ritual or *lata sadhana*. The predominance of tantra in understanding Ramakrishna seems to be due to Kripal's equating of all Shaktism with tantra, which is only a small part of the Shakta tradition. Most of Bengali Shaktism is devotional, following a form of *bhakti*. Kripal claims to describe "what tantra feels like in Bengal," which is some mixture of forbidden sexual activity and altered states. He is not describing Bengali Shakta tantra here, with its focus on death and transcendence. He is describing the sort of New Age tantra found in southern California.

On the other hand, I would note that many of Ramakrishna's statements can be interpreted in several ways, and the book *Interpreting Ramakrishna* is as firm in its interpretations of what Ramakrishna intended as *Kali's Child* is in its own. We do also see a bias at the modern Ramakrishna Mission towards Vedanta philosophy and away from Ramakrishna's style of Shaktism. I was told several times by monks at the Gol Park Ramakrishna Math in Kolkata that Shaktism was only a 'stage' that Ramakrishna went through, and that it was no longer needed once he found Vedanta. Even the head of the Ramakrishna Mission stated that dependence on the goddess was childish and

immature, and that Ramakrishna was beyond that. This is indeed marginalizing Kali, and I think that Kripal's claim about this is correct; the authors of *Interpreting* Ramakrishna should not be "astounded" at his claim (p. 69).

It might also have been useful for *Interpreting Ramakrishna* to say something clearer about the role of the dissertation advisor in getting this thesis accepted and published. While Kripal had a limited amount of time in India and limited language skills, his advisor had more experience of India and should have been able to find errors of translation and cultural understanding. Instead, we have an advisor who did not check the sources, and supported giving the book an award, at least partly because it agreed with her own theories. It was this award that brought the book into its high-profile controversy. It is important for academia to have the equivalent of "due diligence" in law, in which the facts are checked before publication.

We might also rethink the claim in *Interpreting Ramakrishna* that such a negative view of Hindu saints and holy people is primarily due to Orientalism. Psychobiography often involves an equal-opportunity reductionism of spiritual experiences to material causes, and some of the most egregious attacks on saints may be found in the literature of female medieval Catholic saints, whose fasting becomes anorexia, whose visions are hallucinations, and whose love of God is due only to sexual frustration. There are psychobiographies portraying Muhammad as a psychopathic murderer, Gautama Buddha as a depersonalized depressive, Jesus as a victimized survivor, Saint Paul as an epileptic, the prophet Ezekiel as full of pathological dread and loathing, and Saint Teresa of Avila as a hysteric. One need not have a person from South Asia as the subject of such reductionist forms of psychoanalytic interpretation. Even the Judeo-Christian God, Yahweh, has been interpreted in psychobiography as a jealous, narcissistic and genocidal tyrant. According to one recent book, Yahweh's behavior is irrational, vindictive, insecure, dangerous, malevolent, and abusive.[2] This sort of exaggerated pathologizing has resulted in academic claims being discredited and devalued among many religious groups.

Attributions of sexual and violent impulses are ways to bring the transcendent back to earth, to place it in the sphere of human understanding and control. The psycho-analytic approach of "explaining the flower by the fertilizer" involves a universal claim, and imposes a model upon data where it does not always fit. Ramakrishna is a sort of Rorschach blot, "the embodiment of infinite *bhavas,*" so he can be seen in many ways.

But if we hope to understand other cultures instead of getting into conflicts with them, greater empathy and clearer sight are needed. Perhaps it would be useful to have more academics who are also practitioners, like the authors of this book, who can walk the line between criticism and empathy. *Interpreting Ramakrishna* brings out some of the best of each side; it mixes the idealism and dedication of a meditative path with the critical scholarship and historical analysis of academia.

Notes

[1] Jeffrey Kripal, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

[2] See David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast: Images of God in the Hebrew Bible.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999

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Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism. Rajiv Malhotra. New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2011. vii + 471 pages