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Reading Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* from the Perspective of Hinduism

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Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1966–67)¹ has been praised highly for both its literary merit and its spiritual significance. Many critical studies explain the complex nature of the interrelationship between the natural and supernatural in the novel. The unexpected roles that otherworldly beings play in the novel, the resulting satire, and the fantastic in the plot create a certain inevitable puzzlement about the structure and meaning of the novel. Attempts to explain the implications of the spiritual elements underpinning the fantastic span through various belief systems, but given the complexity of Bulgakov's novel, a coherent, conclusive explanation has been elusive.

Central to my reading of Bulgakov's novel is the recognition that divinity's presence in *The Master and Margarita* is more complex than its apparent Christian representation. This reading draws upon an older religious tradition, namely, the Hindu system of belief, to establish correspondences between Hindu images of God and Bulgakov's portrayal of otherworldly entities. Because these correspondences are scattered across a variety of Hindu myths and beliefs, it is difficult to draw a coherent picture and claim that Bulgakov based his fictional divinity on any specific Hindu system. However, various ancient beliefs of Hinduism can be seen to illumine the relationship between different worlds that are brought together, the role of God and the devil, and the nature of divine intervention in the lives of ordinary mortals in Bulgakov's novel. I will restrict myself to the portrayal of the devil, the Master, and Margarita, whom I will compare to relevant images from Hindu mythology.

Hinduism offers much potential for such an exploration through its myths and legends. In Hindu mythology, God is incarnated in this world in different forms, at different times, and for different purposes.² Hindus firmly believe God's declaration that he will manifest himself whenever the forces of evil threaten to destroy positive human virtues.

¹*The Master and Margarita* was published in two issues of the journal *Moskva* in 1966 (no. II) and in 1967 (no. I) in a censored version with cuts. In 1967 it appeared in two translated versions with slight differences. The full text version in Russian appeared only in 1973.

²The mythological stories abound with personifications of gods and goddesses whose purpose on this earth is to combat evil and restore morality. The more well-known of such incarnations are those of Vishnu in the form of Rama and Krishna in the epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*.

Similar to Hinduism, other religions have also offered a means of closing the distance between man and God by admitting various celestial beings such as demi-gods, angels, saints, and others. In Hinduism and Christianity, "there is a common belief that there has been a divine descent through which God has sent his surrogate to the earth and graced us with His presence in a being known as the God-man."³ In Christianity the incarnation is Jesus Christ, as both human and divine, while in Hinduism there are several such incarnations. Following this prototype, at the very beginning of Bulgakov's novel, the divine incarnation that appears in Moscow is a devil. This devil, Woland, fulfilling a role similar to that of the God-man in mythology, takes it upon himself to expose the moral degradation of 1930s Moscow. Bulgakov's depiction of the devil contains unmistakable allusions to, and echoes of, not only Christianity, but also other ancient, pre-Christian systems of belief and their gods. Woland, who has been shown to exhibit "traits not only of the Christian devil, but also of the pre-Christian gods,"⁴ is reminiscent of messengers of God and intermediate beings who moved between heaven and earth upon his service in ancient, pre-Christian religions.⁵

There have been many attempts to explain the Woland's role in Moscow and Pontius Pilate's in Jerusalem in the novel through the Old and New Testaments, apocryphal texts, and Rabbinical literature, including ancient Middle Eastern mythology. In this context, it has been observed that although the novel is "profoundly religious,"⁶ "the variety of critical commentaries has already shown the impossibility of reducing Bulgakov's novel to one single interpretation."⁷ It is clear that the novel's spiritual conception is broader than that of Christianity.⁸ Bulgakov is a religious writer, but the question of which religious view of life and the world he adhered to, remains unanswered. What we know of Bulgakov's spiritual inclinations is based on sources that have described how he was influenced by his theologian father's spirituality during his formative years. "In the 1920s, Bulgakov began immersing himself in his father's spiritual world, studying the Gospels and collecting other religious works with which his father would have been very familiar."⁹ The older Bulgakov emphasized throughout his writings the importance of the "other-worldly supernatural element in human life,

³Daniel E. Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity: The Myth of the God-Man* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1987) 1.

⁴Edythe Haber, "The Mythic Bulgakov: *The Master and Margarita* and Arthur Drews's *The Christ Myth*," *Slavic and East European Journal* 43.2 (1999): 348.

⁵Arthur Drews, *The Christ Myth*, 3rd ed., trans. C. Delisle Burns (Chicago: Open Court, 1911) 38-39.

⁶A. C. Wright, "Satan in Moscow: An Approach to Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," *PMLA* 88.5 (1973): 1172.

⁷Carol Arenberg, "Mythic and Daimonic Paradigms in Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita*," *Essays in Literature* 9.1 (1982): 107.

⁸Wright 1162.

⁹Edythe Haber, *Mikhail Bulgakov. The Early Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 15.

warning of the baleful influence of mindless material advancement."¹⁰ Thus it can be surmised that Bulgakov did not limit himself to Old Testament and Hebraic traditions when dealing with eternal metaphysical questions and when incorporating the fantastic element in *The Master and Margarita*.

As if to reaffirm the divinity of the devil, Bulgakov parallels Woland's stay in Moscow with Christ's passion during Holy Week in Jerusalem, thus compressing the centuries elapsed between the time of Jesus' life and 1930s Moscow. "In the process, Moscow's literary time became a mythical time that can be structurally correlated with the mythical dimension in the Yershalaim chapters."¹¹ Furthermore, at the outset the devil reiterates this connection by recounting some historical events surrounding the crucifixion of Christ and by claiming that he was a witness to the events incognito. Ironically, it is the devil who comes to Moscow as an emissary from God to assert his existence.

At the very beginning of the novel, Bulgakov gives a clue to the profundity and complexity of the devil's identity by quoting the lines from Goethe's *Faust I* in which Mephistopheles introduces himself: "I am part of the power which forever wills evil and forever works good."¹² This admission by the devil, which also appears as the novel's epigraph, has brought forth many critical explanations, ranging from calling Woland confused to describing him as evil incarnate. He is even characterized as a sentimentalist who violates his devotion to evil in order to appeal to Margarita and her Master.¹³ These justifications get more complicated in the context of Goethe's Mephistopheles, who, unlike Bulgakov's Woland, "regards negation as his aim, considers nonexistence better than existence."¹⁴ For Mephistopheles there is a clear-cut demarcation between God and the devil. But such is not the case with Bulgakov's Woland, who "forever works good" and seldom "wills evil." He is neither a parody of God nor an agent of divine providence.¹⁵ This fantastic element in Bulgakov stands for the duality of nature: "the forces of good and evil are not in competition but coexist on more or less equal terms."¹⁶ Developing the idea that Bulgakov's God is pre-Christian and archaic, and given the complex duality of his supernatural being, we are justified in exploring Woland using the ancient Hindu view. Woland, who bears

¹⁰Haber, *Mikhail Bulgakov* 13–14.

¹¹George Krugovoy, *The Gnostic Novel of Mikhail Bulgakov* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991) 68.

¹²Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, trans. Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 1. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text in parentheses.

¹³Raymond Rosenthal, "Bulgakov's Sentimental Devil," *The New Leader*, November 20, 1967, 18–19.

¹⁴Wright 1162.

¹⁵Edward E. Ericson, Jr., "The Satanic Incarnation: Parody in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," *The Russian Review* 33.1 (1974): 25.

¹⁶Laura D. Weeks, "Herbraic Antecedents in *The Master and Margarita*: Woland and Company Revisited," *Slavic Review* 42.2 (1984): 225.

a close correspondence to the demonic force in the Hindu paradigm, cannot be separated from God; Bulgakov's epigraph lends itself to a Hindu interpretation of divinity as a whole and unified entity.¹⁷

In Hinduism, Brahman, the one that is divine, combines "all opposites within itself."¹⁸ This being comprises a collection of opposite qualities, which makes it possible to distinguish and understand one in opposition to the other: when "good" is defined we assume that it is not the same as "bad." Clearly, by combining all that exists in one whole, a major branch of Hinduism preaches monotheism as its basic tenet (although to a layman it may appear as if Hinduism with its hundreds of deities is a polytheistic religion).¹⁹ In this monotheistic tradition of Hindu religious practice, there is a pantheon of gods and goddesses, representing various energies in one single god, Brahman. "The Nameless and the Formless is called by different names, and different forms are attributed to Him, but it is not forgotten that He is One."²⁰ Whereas in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions God generally stands for good qualities (love, truth, justice, etc.) and the devil for that which is evil (hatred, injustice, falsehood, etc.), it is the dichotomy of God and the devil that is stressed in those religions.

From a Christian point of view, Bulgakov's Satan is ambiguous by appearing as an equal to God and accomplishing good deeds. But a Hindu who conceives of the Divine Being as all-encompassing sees Woland as a "righteous demon."²¹ Such demons in Hindu mythology abound, and while they are destined to be born as evildoers, paradoxically enough they often function as executors of the will of the Supreme Being. The hidden purpose of their existence is often to project and glorify an aspect of God, while their own existence can be convincingly explained within the concept of karma.²² The demons, by being made to appear as the opposite of God, reinforce the goodness in God, and it is often God who redeems them from their lowly incarnation by destroying them in vigorous battle on earth. For example, the demon's (Ravana's) presence glorifies god Rama in the monumental epic *Ramayana*. The demons/devils themselves are "ostensibly evil figures" who often have not only the physical might (usually derived from or granted by God as a boon for penance undertaken or services rendered) but often display limited, though highly moral and intellectual, attributes

¹⁷Some critics come close to seeing godliness in the devil. E. Ericson argues that Satan is the parodic reflection of God. Carol Arenberg agrees that Bulgakov's God is older than God in Christian and Greek mythology.

¹⁸Donald Johnson and Jean Johnson, *God and Gods in Hinduism* (New Delhi: 1972) 25.

¹⁹Klaus K. Klostermeier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 2nd ed. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) 14.

²⁰K. M. Sen, *Hinduism* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965) 20–21.

²¹Clifford Hospital, *The Righteous Demon. A Study of Bali* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984) 1.

²²That is, the demon's present birth, according to Hinduism, is determined by the karma acquired by him in his previous birth, and the karma in this birth will influence the next birth, and so on.

and who function to fulfill an assigned role.²³ They, as everyone and everything in the great cosmic design, are also a part of the whole. This concept is central to monotheistic Hinduism and expressed in very simple words, "Thou art That."²⁴

Bulgakov's epigraph to *The Master and Margarita* refers to this very same notion in reply to the question "who are you?" by reiterating: "I am part of the power" (1). Woland seems to understand that he is a part of the whole spirit with a limited scope and specific assignment. This awareness is significant, as he acts on divine impulses: during the Ball, in the manner of many a Hindu deity conferring a boon, he offers to fulfill one wish that Margarita might have in return for her selfless service as a hostess.²⁵ Margarita immediately remembers the mental anguish that the young girl Frieda is undergoing for suffocating and killing her newborn with a handkerchief. Margarita asks that Frieda be forgiven and not reminded of her guilt every day (Frieda is haunted by the presence of a similar handkerchief on her night table). But Woland says that forgiving Frieda is not in his jurisdiction and hands it over to others by saying: "each department should concern itself with its own business" (242). Woland thus has divine powers, but they are limited; what is more, he is aware of his limitation.

Woland arrives in Moscow with his two aids, Azazello and Behemoth, and an "interpreter" by the name of Koroviev. During their short stay in Moscow, Woland and his retinue cause havoc in the lives of corrupt bureaucrats, greedy government officials, and crooks who are swindling for personal gain, by exposing their weaknesses. At the same time Woland brings two other Muscovites together, namely the Master and Margarita: the persecuted writer of the novel and his lover. A poet, Ivan, struggling to write poetry commissioned by the party, gains an understanding of the deeper issues of life and death, and inherits the Master's mission after Bulgakov's novel ends. Interwoven in all this is the Master's novel about Pontius Pilate and Christ's crucifixion. The events are conveyed from different points of view: there is Woland's tale as a witness, Ivan's dream as a continuation of Woland's narration, and the Master's narrative in the second half of the book, which constitutes the novel's first "installment." The actions in both Jerusalem and Moscow take place in the second half of Holy Week, culminating on Easter Sunday. The Master's novel ends with Pilate's story attesting to the fact that the Master is the creator of the novel within the novel.

The Master, who is the architect and the fictional author of the manuscript (within the novel *The Master and Margarita*), reveals the main issue of the inde-

²³Hospital 1. The author explains further that "the demons in Hindu mythology are mighty, devoted, virtuous, and even god-fearing at the beginning. But inadvertently, in the peak of their life's success, they become proud and boastful of their power. This becomes the cause of their downfall. Since they can be vanquished only by someone more powerful than them, gods or goddesses appear to destroy them."

²⁴In Sanskrit, it is "Tat twam assii."

²⁵This event in the novel relates to the myth of Savithri's devotion to her husband and her persistent demand for her husband's life from the god of death.

structibility of literature and through it the liberation of a true artist from a society in which censorship and oppression are rampant. In the novel, suffering becomes timeless as the Master's ordeals are mirrored in the passion of Jesus Christ, both lonely figures who "are in conflict with the society as a result of unorthodox views, both are simple men with a mission."²⁶ Frustrated with the world order, both Christ in *The Master and Margarita* (called "Yeshua") and the Master want to destroy specific manuscripts. For example, Yeshua confides to Pontius Pilate how he wanted to, but could not bring himself to, burn the writing of Matthew Levi, who followed him everywhere and wrote down everything he said (16). Similarly, the Master tells Woland that the novel he wrote on Pontius Pilate is irrecoverable, as he himself burned it on a stove because he had lost faith in it and in himself. But Woland refutes the Master emphatically—"That cannot be. Manuscripts don't burn" (245)—and retrieves the whole manuscript immediately.²⁷

Bulgakov has created a God-like visionary in his hero, the Master, who writes a novel about Christ and Pontius Pilate. By his own definition he is not just a writer, but "a master" (136). Since an identifiable name will reduce the Master to a human, Bulgakov wishes to invoke the function he plays as a creator who controls and directs the event in the capacity of a "Master." Even one of the commonly used Sanskrit words for god, *Swami*, literally means "Master." The Master has been identified with Christ. "The Master, like Yeshua, is a prophet and herald of the Word and not the Deed. He is satisfied with little, lives in penury, and all his interests are purely in the sphere of spirit."²⁸ He stands alone, withdrawn from society, without the need for material things, but consumed by his own purpose in life. He knows more than ordinary mortals do. In the mental asylum, where he is confined for treatment, he tells Ivan about his love and inspiration, Margarita, and about the novel he wrote when he was with her.

The function of Margarita, however, remains an enigma to the readers. So, too, do the several associations with Hindu goddesses and mythological characters that one can draw with Margarita. She is a happily married woman, has a house, money, and a loving husband. However, none of this satisfies her, and she seeks out the Master in early spring with yellow flowers in her hands: "she saw only me and she gave me a look that was not merely anxious, but even pained. And I was struck not so much by her beauty as by the extraordinary, incomparable loneliness in her eyes!" (115–16).

²⁶Wright 1169.

²⁷Woland's declaration about the indestructibility of the written word evokes the verse from *Bhaghwat Gita* (Chapter 11, verse 23) where God says to Arjuna concerning the invincibility of the soul: "not wounded by weapons, not burned by fire, not dried by the wind, not wetted by water."

²⁸L. Skorino, "Characters Without Carnival Masks," *Studies in Soviet Literature* 5 (Spring 1969): 32; trans. and rpt. from *Voprosy Literatury* 6 (1968): 32.

Their love is spontaneous and everlasting. The Master tells Ivan about their love and how they felt when they first met: "We talked as if we had parted only the day before, as if we had known each other for many years" (117). Rather than being together physically, they are bound spiritually to each other to the extent that one is unable to function without the other. Their love seems heavenly, bound by eternity.

In this aspect, Margarita is akin to the Hindu mythological character Radha, who is Vishnu's mistress in his incarnation as Krishna on this earth. It is believed that Radha is passionately drawn to Krishna.²⁹ In mythology, Radha is often depicted in her torment of separation from her love, Krishna. She seeks him everywhere. In many love lyrics, Radha's image as the one who is "abandoning her social duty to love"³⁰ is central. She is often portrayed as risking both reputation and status in her attempt to find her love.³¹ Margarita's devotion to the Master is reminiscent of Radha's devotion to Krishna, a union that symbolizes the sublime love between a man and a woman. Margarita, the wife of a senior official, betrays her husband, abandons everything, and becomes a witch to join the Master. In a desperate attempt to retrieve the Master's novel and find out about the fate of the Master, Margarita ventures to visit the devil and becomes his mistress during his ball. She is convinced that she will do anything for the Master's sake, because there is no hope left for her in this world (194).

Margarita ventures into the dangerous world to resurrect the novel. Even though she does not know if there are any risks involved in surrendering to Azazello's plan, she says emphatically: "I agree to everything. I agree to play out this whole comedy with the cream, I agree to go to the devil and back!" (194-95), in the hope of seeing the Master. Thereafter the narrator reveals that Margarita makes a pact with Azazello, who transforms her into a witch, and she flies on a broomstick to the Sabbath. As a witch, Margarita flies naked over Moscow and ransacks the apartments of all those who were connected with the corrupt Moscow literary circle, and she enjoys herself immensely: "she began striking at random. She broke the pots of ficus plants in the room where the piano was. Before finishing that, she went back to the bedroom, slashed the sheets with a kitchen knife, and broke the glass-covered photographs. She did not feel in the least bit tired, and the sweat poured off her in streams" (204).

The women attending the balls, especially the hostesses, are expected to have sexual intercourse with the devil. The transformed witch ordinarily makes a

²⁹David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 81.

³⁰Kinsley 86.

³¹This motif is more distinctly expressed in the legendary Meera, whose love for Krishna transcends physical implications and yet challenges social conventions, and for which she was even imprisoned. Then there is also the female figure of Andal in the Tamil tradition, who yearns for a union with the male entity.

pact with the devil for life. But Margarita's pact has one single purpose only and does not deliver her to the will of the devil. On the other hand, the devil pledges that she can have any of her requests fulfilled by taking the role of the mistress of the ball. He becomes her subordinate during the ball. She does not hesitate and knows her role exactly, being in supreme control of the situation.³²

She is active and motivates every action in the second half of the novel, while the Master stays essentially passive. In this respect Margarita's role is akin to that of Sakthi in Hindu mythology, the powerful goddess who is required to activate the inert male energy. It is said of Sakthi: "The male power, inert, transcendent, requires the female power to awaken it. Without the female energy, there is no creation or evolution."³³ In her fierce forms, Sakthi is called Kali. She combats demons threatening the stability of the cosmos. Usually this goddess is depicted as being black or yellow, naked, with blood dripping from her tongue, and wearing a garland of skulls around her neck. Margarita is associated with these images. The Master recalls the first time he saw her: "She was carrying some hideous, disturbing yellow flowers. These flowers stood out against her black spring coat" (115). Time and again Margarita will adorn one of these two colors throughout the novel. It will be the yellow color that the Master says he pursued: "Obeying the yellow sign, I, too, turned into the side street and followed her" (116). The atmosphere becomes unnatural. The street becomes eerie and deserted. The Master says: "We walked silently along the winding lane. I on one side, and she on the other. And imagine, there wasn't a soul in the street" (116). As the Master worries about losing sight of her, she says: "Do you like my flowers?" (116). Her voice reverberates off the dirty yellow walls, and the Master and Margarita find themselves overpowered by an all-consuming love for each other. The extraordinariness of this meeting between the Master and Margarita is reminiscent of the opening of the novel when the editor and the poet see Woland. The street becomes strange and deserted, the day is hot, and the warm apricot juice Berlioz and Ivan drink gives out yellow fumes. In this unbelievable atmosphere they suddenly notice the devil. The repeated mention of the color yellow and the extraordinary situation at these important meetings (the Master with Margarita and Ivan and Berlioz with Woland) signal the advent of the supernatural in the lives of these mortals.

Margarita's role at the end of Satan's ball parallels the fierce image of the Hindu goddess Kali. The abundant references to the severed heads provide a carnivalesque atmosphere for Satan, his retinue, and Margarita.³⁴ Margarita is entreated at the ball to drink human blood; the Hindu goddess Kali is depicted

³²Hindu mythology is full of gods and demi-gods granting favors to mortals in exchange for their virtuous life or for their past karma.

³³Johnson 69.

³⁴Bruce A. Beatie and Phyllis W. Powell, "Story and Symbol: Notes Toward a Structural Analysis of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," *Russian Language Triquarterly* 15 (1978): 228-36.

holding the skull of a demon in her hand as blood drips from her tongue. She is described by Kinsley as follows: "The goddess Kali is almost always described as having a terrible frightening appearance. She is always black or dark, is usually naked, and has long, disheveled hair. She is adorned with severed arms as a girdle, freshly cut heads as a necklace, children's corpses as earrings, and serpents as bracelets."³⁵

Kali is depicted as dancing furiously on a battlefield after conquering the god of destruction. In this pose the goddess continues to kill until her consort, Siva, intervenes and calms her fury by letting her dance on his body. Here the union of the male and female god is stressed, affirming the creation of good after the destruction of evil. Bulgakov's novel also ends with the Master and Margarita joined together, reinstating their love, order, and goodness for eternity. Bulgakov creates the union of the Master and Margarita as a quintessence of the union of a man and a woman. Sergei Bulgakov says that man was created in the image and likeness of God "in a twofold embodiment of the masculine and the feminine principle."³⁶ Similarly, he creates the Master and Margarita as representative man and representative woman.

The union of male and female is important in both Hindu mythology and Bulgakov's novel. That they are each part of the whole is fundamental to Hinduism and is represented as Siva-Sakthi in one figure of the hermaphrodite, half male (right) and half female (left), called Ardhanarisvara.³⁷ The novel *The Master and Margarita* embodies this oneness even in its depiction of the union of the Master and Margarita, in its title, and in the way the book is laid out in two parts, emphasizing the Master's role in the first part and Margarita's in the second. The creation, preservation, and resurrection of the novel are bound to the love life of the Master and Margarita. Although the Master wrote the novel within Bulgakov's novel, it would not exist but for Margarita, who "resurrected" it by making a pact with Woland.

³⁵Kinsley 116.

³⁶Sergei Bulgakov, *The Wisdom of God* (New York: Paisley Press, 1937) 150.

³⁷Alain Danielou, *Hindu Polytheism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964) 203.