



## ARTICLE

# The Feminine Form in Saundarya Lahari: A Devotional Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This study presents a close philological and interpretive analysis of the Saundarya Lahari, a canonical Sanskrit hymn attributed to Ādi Śaṅkarācārya and central to the Śākta tradition. Comprising 100 ślokas, the text uniquely fuses devotional poetry with metaphysical doctrine, portraying Goddess Lalitā Tripurasundarī as the embodiment of supreme consciousness and cosmic function. The feminine form described in its verses is not a literary flourish but a theological statement—each image encoding layered meanings grounded in ritual, cosmology, and non-dual philosophy. The study adopts a multidisciplinary approach combining traditional Sanskrit exegesis (bhāṣya-based interpretation), close literary reading of śloka structure and poetics, and comparative engagement with foundational texts including the Upaniṣads, Tantrasāra, and Nāṭyaśāstra. Select verses are examined for their use of metaphor, mantra, and iconography to reveal how the goddess's beauty operates as a means of spiritual instruction and internal transformation. This includes analysis of terms such as kāmakaḷā, śrīcakra, and rasa, each positioned within the framework of Śrīvidyā and Advaita Vedānta. By situating the text within both its liturgical function and philosophical lineage, the study argues that the Saundarya Lahari is not merely poetic adoration but a coded map of sādhanā (spiritual practice). The goddess's form—celebrated from head to toe—is shown to embody the convergence of the sensual and the transcendent, form and formlessness. In recovering the exegetical and ritual dimensions of the text, this paper reaffirms its enduring status as a work of both literary beauty and spiritual depth.

**Keywords:** Saundarya Lahari; Aesthetic; Advaita Philosophy; Meditation; Feminine Form

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# 1. Introduction

The *Saundarya Lahari* (Waves of Beauty), attributed to Adi Shankaracharya, is a text blending devotion, philosophy, and aesthetics, glorifying the Divine Feminine as Goddess Shakti. Comprising 100 verses, it poetically describes the beauty, grace, and cosmic significance of the Goddess Sakti while incorporating tantric mysticism and Advaita principles<sup>[1]</sup>. This text is not merely a hymn of praise but a spiritual guide that leads the seeker toward divine realization by contemplating the beauty of the Goddess Sakti as a reflection of the cosmic order. Reading the *Saundarya Lahari* is transformative, as it has traditionally been used in spiritual practices across India to awaken devotion, inspire inner purity, and align the seeker with divine consciousness. Historically, sages and householders alike have recited its verses for both aesthetic contemplation and spiritual elevation. By contemplating the Goddess's beauty, one moves beyond material aesthetics to experience oneness with the Divine, aligning with universal rhythms and attaining spiritual harmony. Recent scholarship has renewed focus on the symbolic and philosophical dimensions of such classical works, recognizing their continued relevance in discussions of selfhood, ritual, and embodiment<sup>[2,3]</sup>. Scholars have also emphasized the interpretive frameworks that blend *rasa* (aesthetic essence) and *bhava* (emotional states) to understand how these texts engage the reader in transformative experience<sup>[4]</sup>. Feminine symbolism in Hindu theology, particularly through figures such as Shakti, Parvati, and Mohini, is increasingly seen not merely as mythic representation, but as a complex expression of cosmic principles and spiritual power<sup>[5]</sup>.

In the following exploration, I will depict and analyse the symbolism of the feminine form, as described in the text, uncovering its deeper metaphysical meanings, one aspect at a time, where certain verses of *Saundarya Lahari*, with specific verse numbers mentioned in brackets for reference. This study adopts a thematic-symbolic approach to the *Saundarya Lahari*. Selected verses focus on the depiction of the Goddess's physical form — hair, eyes, lips, neck, waist, hips, and feet — where beauty (*saundarya*) operates as a gateway to understanding deeper spiritual truths. Interpretations are guided by Advaita Ve-

danta metaphysics (as expressed in Upaniṣads), Śākta-Tantric cosmology, and classical Indian aesthetic theory (Nāṭyaśāstra, *Rasa* theory). Verses were chosen based on their philosophical density, symbolic richness, and devotional significance as preserved in traditional commentaries. The analysis prioritizes emotional resonance (*rasa*), spiritual meaning, and metaphysical integration rather than linguistic or purely historical exegesis.

## 1.1. Meaning of Beauty

In classical thought and mythology, beauty is often personified in the feminine form, embodying the principles of creation, sustenance, and allure. The episode of Vishnu assuming the radiant female form of Mohini to enchant Shiva highlights the irresistible nature of Absolute Beauty, transcending even the ascetic detachment of Shiva. In Hindu mythology, Mohini is the only female avatar of Vishnu, who assumes this enchanting form to achieve cosmic balance during critical moments, such as the churning of the ocean. Beyond the mythological narrative, Mohini also symbolizes the divine principle that beauty (*saundarya*) itself can be a vehicle of spiritual transformation, illustrating that ultimate reality manifests not only through abstraction but also through sensory wonder. Thus, Vishnu as Mohini embodies both factual incarnation and conceptual truth, bridging form and transcendence. This transformation occurs along the vertical axis, a symbolic representation of the connection between the material and the transcendent, emphasizing that true beauty lies at the intersection of the perceptual and the conceptual. The perceptual refers to what we experience directly through our senses, while the conceptual involves the thoughts, ideas, and deeper meanings we associate with those perceptions. For example, when we see a flower, we perceive its vibrant colors, soft petals, and fragrance—this is the perceptual aspect. However, the conceptual arises when we attach meaning to it: the flower could symbolize love, beauty, or the cycle of life. If the flower is offered at the feet of the Goddess, it signifies devotion and surrender, whereas if it is placed in the hair of a person, it might represent grace, adornment, or beauty. Thus, true beauty lies at the intersection of the perceptual and the conceptual, where sensory experiences are enriched by deeper symbolic meaning. Philosophically, the feminine is seen as the archetypal form, with the mas-

culine deriving its essence in relation to it. This aligns with the notion of prakriti (nature, feminine) as the creative and sustaining force, while purusha (consciousness, masculine) interacts with it to manifest the cosmos.

The idea that “a man in love sees his own self” (*kami svatam pasyati*) reveals beauty as a profound self-reflection, where the beloved becomes a mirror for the divine essence within the lover. Shiva’s enchantment by Mohini symbolizes how even the ascetic can be drawn to Absolute Beauty, suggesting that beauty is not merely external but a cosmic principle imbued with divine reality. When Vishnu, representing Absolute Reality, assumes the female form, it signifies the conferral of reality onto the negative, creative principle of becoming. In this view, femininity symbolizes receptivity and creativity, a necessary complement to the masculine static principle, illustrating the interplay of dualities within the Absolute. In the context of divine love and transformation, even the look of Rati, the goddess of love and passion, is said to make Kama (the god of desire) so irresistibly attractive that it bewilders even the most ascetic sages, emphasizing the transformative and disarming power of beauty and love. This allure is mirrored in Madhurya Bhava, where Purusha, in the form of a devotee, transcends the limitations of masculinity, embracing the feminine principle to experience divine love in its fullest expression. As a Gopika or Radha, the devotee—Ramkrishna Paramhansa—embodies the tenderness, surrender, and receptivity required to merge with Sri Krishna <sup>[6]</sup>. In this state of devotion, even physical transformation to a feminine form has been described, symbolizing the ultimate dissolution of ego and individuality.

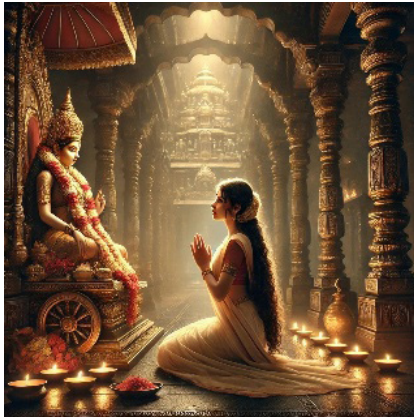
While the Saundarya Lahari is predominantly interpreted through the lens of Advaita Vedanta and Śākta Tantra, alternative readings exist within dualistic traditions (e.g., Dvaita Vedanta) that view the Goddess Sakti and Supreme Consciousness as eternally distinct. Some interpretations within early Śrī Vaishnavism emphasize devotional duality rather than non-duality, offering a contrasting theological framework <sup>[7,8]</sup>. These pluralistic perspectives highlight that while the present analysis embraces Advaita-based symbolism, other doctrinal traditions continue to see the feminine divine differently — not as an aspect of unified Brahman, but as an independent, relational entity.

## 1.2. Feminine Form

After understanding the concept of beauty, we delve deeper into the essence of the female form, as eloquently depicted in verse 93 of Saundarya Lahari. The female form is celebrated as a harmonious embodiment of natural beauty and grace, reflecting the essence of creation itself. It is seen in the natural sweetness of her smile, radiating warmth and charm, and in the delicate tenderness of a flower, mirroring her gentle and compassionate mind. Her form also exudes strength, symbolized by the firmness of a ruby stone in her breasts, while the seductive elegance of her hips and the voluptuous curves of her back and breasts signify the fullness of life and the creative power of the feminine. This poetic depiction captures her as a vessel of beauty, allure, and vitality, revered for her ability to inspire love and devotion. According to verse 12, even Brahma, the divine poet and creator of the Vedas, finds himself at a loss for words to adequately describe the infinite beauty of the Divine Goddess Shakti. Her splendour transcends the bounds of language, leaving even the most eloquent hymns incomplete. While countless seekers undertake arduous penance, deep meditation, and endure suffering to attain spiritual realization, it is her boundless grace that effortlessly bestows enlightenment. This grace is a reminder that the ultimate truth of existence lies in beauty itself—a beauty that manifests in the feminine form as the essence of creation, sustenance, and transcendence. Nature, in its purest essence, is beauty, and the purpose of human life is to admire, experience, and honor this divine beauty. This beauty is personified in the form of Goddess Shakti, the cosmic feminine force, who is the source of all creation and the pathway to spiritual realization. To behold her form is to witness the union of physical and spiritual perfection, where beauty serves as both the journey and the destination in the pursuit of the divine.

In the depiction of divinity, there exists a symbolic distinction in how Gods and Goddesses are described, reflecting their cosmic roles and spiritual significance. For Gods, the description traditionally begins from the feet and ascends to the head, symbolizing the journey of a seeker rising from the material realm (feet) to the spiritual pinnacle (head), embodying their role as guides to transcendence. In contrast, for Goddesses, the description begins

from the head and descends to the feet, symbolizing their role as the source of grace and creation, descending from the divine to manifest in the material world. This descending movement reflects their nurturing and sustaining nature, showering blessings and fulfilling the needs of the devotees. The head represents wisdom, power, and divinity, while the journey downward symbolizes their accessibility and the tangible presence of divinity in the world, where even their feet hold immense significance as a place of ultimate surrender and devotion (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1.** A devotee kneels before the Goddess in *Anjali Mudra*, symbolizing deep humility and surrender. The posture signifies the devotee's movement from individuality to universality, aligning personal devotion with the cosmic order represented by the Goddess Shakti.

Source: Generated by the Author Using ChatGPT. The image was manually directed, composed, and finalized to maintain alignment with traditional Hindu theological symbolism. No third-party copyrighted material was used. The author affirms that ethical standards concerning AI-generated content, originality, and scholarly transparency have been strictly observed.

## 2. Discussion

In the upcoming section, we delve into the feminine form by exploring its symbolism through the female body, beginning with the hair (Verse 43). A woman's hair is likened to a dark forest, representing the primordial darkness of ignorance and unawareness. However, this darkness is not void but carries an inherent fragrance, emanating from within, symbolizing the hidden potential for enlightenment and grace.

When activated by the Ajna Chakra (the third eye), this darkness is transformed into a radiant blue flower, representing wisdom and spiritual awakening. The blue flower signifies the power of the mind, where clarity and intuition

emerge, dissolving the shadows of ignorance. While every person carries ignorance within, the capacity to overcome it lies within themselves. Through wisdom, clarity, and inner awakening, one can transform ignorance into understanding. Scientifically, the application of sindoor on the Ajna Chakra region is believed to enhance emotional stability and mental clarity by stimulating the pituitary gland, highlighting the ancient integration of symbolic ritual and physiological benefit<sup>[9]</sup>.

The face of the Goddess, as described in Verse 45, resembles a lotus, symbolizing purity and beauty. Her curly hair is likened to a swarm of bees, emphasizing sweetness and dynamic attraction. Moving from poetic imagery to emotional resonance, the Goddess's eyes embody expansive cosmic qualities, being compared to eight ancient cities. The comparison of the Goddess's teeth to pollen reflects the subtle symbolism of divine beauty. The comparison of teeth to pollen, while biologically non-literal, follows a poetic and symbolic tradition where sensory images evoke deeper emotional and metaphysical resonances rather than aiming at scientific botanical accuracy. Just as pollen within a lotus draws bees toward its hidden center, the radiant teeth in the Goddess's smile draw seekers toward the core of absolute beauty. This beauty, however, is appreciated only by those who possess the purest vision and the deepest devotion. The *Śodaśī* mantra, central to the *Śrī Vidyā* tradition, is revered as the seed of divine knowledge. Comprising sixteen *bīja*-s (seed syllables), the mantra is symbolically related to the thirty-two teeth found in the human mouth. These teeth — divided into upper and lower rows — metaphorically represent the duality between the soul (*jīva*) and the Supreme (*Brahman*). This duality, born of ignorance, mirrors the perceived separation between the individual and the universal, an illusion that binds the human soul to worldly limitations. The ultimate aim within *Śrī Vidyā* worship is to transcend this illusory separation and realize the essential unity of the soul and the Supreme. Deep meditative practices, often performed in seclusion, emphasize the esoteric understanding of this unity. In these practices, the *bindusthana* (central point) becomes the focal locus of meditation, symbolizing the dissolution of duality and the realization of the oneness underlying all existence.

Her eyebrows, likened to Cupid's bow with a hid-



den string, symbolize the power of attraction and transformation (verse 47). The right eye, like the sun, begins the day, while the left eye, like the moon, ends it. The middle eye, representing twilight, bridges day and night, symbolizing balance and transition (Verse 48). The Goddess's eyes are compared to eight ancient cities—*Viśāla*, *Kalyāṇi*, *Ayodhyā*, *Dhārā*, *Madhurā*, *Bhogavatī*, *Avantī*, and *Vijaya*—each symbolizing a unique divine quality. These associations are not merely geographic or historical; they evoke specific *rasas*, or emotional moods, that guide the devotee's perception. For example, *Viśāla* (expansiveness) evokes *adbhuta rasa* (wonder), *Madhurā* (sweetness) aligns with *śṛṅgāra rasa* (romantic love), and *Ayodhyā* (invincibility) reflects *vīra rasa* (heroism). In this way, her eyes become vessels of emotional and spiritual resonance, preserving thematic continuity between sacred geography and aesthetic experience (verse 49). The Goddess Sakti's eyes are a divine embodiment of cosmic principles and emotions, reflecting her multifaceted nature. Each emotional state associated with her eyes—love, anger, fear, and wonder—connects to the classical theory of *nava rasas* (nine emotions) (verse 50). This emotional depth reveals that the Goddess Sakti is not merely a static symbol of beauty but a dynamic reflection of the emotional universe.

Her love for Shiva embodies *śṛṅgāra rasa* (romantic love), representing deep devotion and the spiritual unity between the Goddess Sakti and her consort. Through this love, the Goddess Sakti transcends mere romantic affection, symbolizing the ultimate merging of dual energies. The Goddess Sakti's contempt for other men reflects *bībhatsa rasa* (disgust), signifying her unwavering loyalty and chastity towards Shiva alone. Similarly, her anger toward Ganga, who resides atop Shiva's head, manifests as *raudra rasa* (anger), expressing her protective instincts and the passionate safeguarding of her sacred bond. The element of surprise she exhibits toward Girisha (Shiva) captures *adbhuta rasa* (wonder), illustrating her awe and awareness of cosmic mysteries. Conversely, her fear toward the serpent coiled around Shiva symbolizes *bhayānaka rasa* (fear), acknowledging her humility in the face of unpredictable, primal cosmic forces. Her joyous smile towards her friends illustrates *hāsyā rasa* (joy and humor), highlighting her nurturing, approachable dimen-

sion. Finally, her deep compassion for devotees resonates with *karuṇa rasa* (pathos), reflecting her boundless grace and maternal care for all beings. Together, these varied emotional expressions illustrate the divine completeness of her character, harmonizing human emotions with cosmic symbolism<sup>[4,5]</sup>.

The exhibition of *rasa* (emotional essence) serves as more than aesthetic representation; it elevates the human mind to a higher meditative state by harmonizing internal emotions with universal consciousness. Through the experience of the *nava rasas* (nine emotional flavors), personal attachments dissolve, fostering introspection and emotional balance.

Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* explains that *rasa* culminates in *ānanda* (bliss), aligning the individual's experience with a state akin to spiritual liberation<sup>[4,5]</sup>. In devotional contexts, *rasa* acts as a bridge between the individual soul (*jīva*) and the universal soul (*Paramātmā*), inducing *samādhi* (meditative absorption) through aesthetic engagement. This emotional transcendence transforms art into a potent tool for spiritual awakening<sup>[6,7]</sup>. By aesthetically engaging with divine beauty, the devotee is drawn closer to experiencing the ultimate non-dual reality, achieving unity with the cosmic consciousness (verse 51).

Her eyelashes, soft as feathers, enhance the expressions that stir Shiva's mind (verse 52). The three eyes, in their hues of red, white, and blue, symbolize the *gunas*—*rajas* (passion), *sattva* (purity), and *tamas* (inertia)—and correspond to Brahma, Vishnu, and Rudra, as well as the rivers Sona, Ganga, and Yamuna (verses 53 and 54). In every individual, *sattva* (purity), *rajas* (desire and activity), and *tamas* (inertia) coexist, each influencing actions differently. *Sattva* leads to happiness, *rajas* to restlessness, and *tamas* to ignorance. At any given moment, one *guna* may dominate, shaping behavior and thought<sup>[10–12]</sup>. When she closes her eyes, it signals annihilation; when they open, it heralds creation. Thus, her eyes remain eternally open, radiating grace (verse 55). The fish, territorial and vigilant in its watery domain, quivers under Goddess Sakti's commanding gaze, sensing an unspoken decree of destruction. Yet, it peers unblinking through layers of water, using its environment as a medium of perception, its life woven into the fluidity of survival. Unlike the fish, the human mind holds the power to become still, contemplate the Goddess

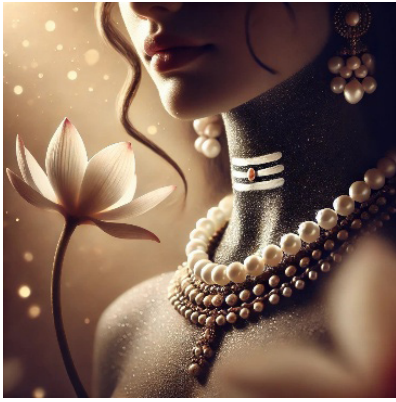
Sakti, and attain liberation—only through thoughtlessness can freedom be realized. Her gaze, like the gentle rays of the moon, blesses all equally—rich and poor alike—spreading divine beauty and grace to all who adore her (verses 56–58) <sup>[13]</sup>.

The Goddess Sakti's earrings shine brilliantly, casting their radiance upon Shiva. He rides the earth as his chariot, with the sun and moon as its wheels, symbolizing cosmic balance and her deep connection to universal forces. Her speech, imbued with the divine melody of Saraswati, resonates like the soft jingling of her earrings, blessing devotees with wisdom and inspiration (verses 59 and 60). Her nose, likened to a slender bamboo shoot, carries an aura of elegance. She wears a pearl (moti) that sways gently with her breath, enhancing the divine aura of her being. While breath is typically warm, the pearl inside her nostril cools the air as it passes through, symbolizing the soothing and nurturing essence of her presence (verse 61). The hollow bamboo, when infused with breath, transforms into a flute that produces melodies capable of calming the mind and soothing the soul. Similarly, her breath, gentle and divine, is compared to the flute, for it carries a rhythm of serenity and grace that harmonizes the heart and brings peace to all who sense its presence.

The Goddess Sakti's lips, compared to coral fruits, radiate a deep red hue, symbolizing vitality and divine allure (verse 62). The perfect balance of her lips reflects harmony and grace, while her smile, as soft and sweet as moonlight, enchants even the Chakora birds. When they drink water under the moonlight, it becomes sweetened by the memory of her smile. To remove this overwhelming sweetness, they drink every night to bring a hint of sourness, striving for balance. This reflects a deeper truth: too many blessings at once can unsettle the self, prompting a natural need to restore equilibrium. Even those who momentarily merge with divine unity must return to daily life and tasks, as every individual is born to fulfill their worldly duties, creating harmony between divine grace and earthly existence. (verse 63). Her tongue, red like a hibiscus flower (verse 64), reflects divine energy and power. As she

chews betel leaf, areca nut, and camphor, these natural elements preserve and enhance the vivid hue of her lips and tongue (verse 65). Her speech resonates with a celestial harmony, surpassing even Saraswati's lute, and embodies the creative force and wisdom of the universe (verse 66). This depiction signifies that consuming natural, nourishing elements preserves the body's vitality and purity, allowing its functions to surpass ordinary benchmarks. Just as appropriate natural food consumption ensures a healthy body and mind, it also cultivates clarity and purity in one's actions and output, aligning them with higher principles. Both the father and the husband treat the Goddess Sakti's chin with a certain distance or lightness. The chin symbolizes a realm that is neither purely matter nor purely mind, but something existing in between. To Shiva, the husband, the chin holds a symbolic, figurative meaning, tied to deeper spiritual truths. To her father, the chin is real and tangible, but his connection to it is lighter and more detached. These subtle details carry great significance, as they reveal the Advaita philosophy hidden within this poetic imagery, where the Goddess Sakti symbolizes the unity of material and spiritual existence (verse 67).

The touch of Shiva on Parvati's neck causes goosebumps, poetically described as lotus stalks, while her white pearl necklace darkens, symbolizing the transformative power of love. Her neck is adorned with three lines, representing swaram (notes), layam (rhythm), and ragam (melody), and on a deeper level, the three gunas—sattva (purity), rajas (passion), and tamas (inertia) (**Figure 2**). From her neck emerges the essence of music, encompassing time (gati), syncopation (gamaka), and melody (gita), which bring beauty and flow to creation. During their marriage, Shiva tied the māṅgalyasūtra on her neck, made of three intertwined yellow threads. These threads, thickened and left with open ends, symbolize the interconnectedness of life and the centrality of māṅgalya (auspiciousness). The three folds of her neck further signify the existential elements of music and the harmonious rhythm of life. This divine symbolism reflects the unity of love, art, and creation (verses 68 and 69) <sup>[14]</sup>.



**Figure 2.** Depiction of Goddess Sati with a blue neck adorned by three distinct lines, symbolizing the three gunas—*Sattva* (Purity), *Rajas* (Passion), and *Tamas* (Inertia). These lines metaphorically express the interdependence of cosmic forces shaping material and spiritual reality.

Source: Generated by the Author Using ChatGPT. The image was manually directed, composed, and finalized to maintain alignment with traditional Hindu theological symbolism. No third-party copyrighted material was used. The author affirms that ethical standards concerning AI-generated content, originality, and scholarly transparency have been strictly observed.

The four hands of the Goddess Sakti, tender and supple like the lotus stalk's pearly core, symbolize the perfect balance between the material and spiritual realms. This analogy highlights the neutral and subtle nature of a "thinking substance", embodying creativity and grace (verse 70). For example, a lump of clay is a "thinking substance" in the sense that it is neutral, unformed, and full of potential. In the hands of a skilled potter, it can be shaped into a beautiful pot, much like a subtle and open mind can create new ideas or solve problems with grace and creativity. Her hands are incomparable even to the radiant lotus flowers, which derive their luster from the feet of Lakshmi, further emphasizing her unparalleled divinity (verse 71). Her breast milk holds the divine essence of amrita, the nectar of immortality, which ensures that her young boy (referred to as Ganesha and Kartikya) remains forever youthful (verses 72 and 73). When bestowed upon a Brahmin, it transforms him into a poet, endowed with divine inspiration. This is exemplified in the story of Tirugnana Sambandar, the Tamil Saivaite saint. As a child, he was said to have been fed divine milk by Goddess Sakti. This sacred act awakened his spiritual wisdom and inspired his profound devotional compositions, which continue to resonate with seekers and devotees to this day (verse 75). From her navel, a tendril of smoke rises, delicate and graceful, resembling strands

of hair, evoking mystery and allure. Her waist, slender and flowing, is likened to the River Kalindi, narrowing at the middle with elegance and expanding into the fullness of pitchers at the breast, symbolizing abundance and nurturing grace (verses 79 and 80). The Padma Purana speaks of the River Kalindi as a divine and sacred river, revered for its beauty and spiritual significance. It describes Kalindi as having the enchanting blue hue of lotus petals, symbolizing purity, serenity, and divine energy. At the navel, the Ganga forms a swirling whirlpool, symbolizing the cosmic flow of creation and dissolution. This swirling motion creates an opening like a cave, representing a sacred space or portal where Shiva, the eternal ascetic and cosmic force, resides. The whirlpool at the navel serves as a metaphor for the dynamic interplay of energies, where creation begins, sustenance flows, and the ultimate union of Shakti and Shiva is realized.

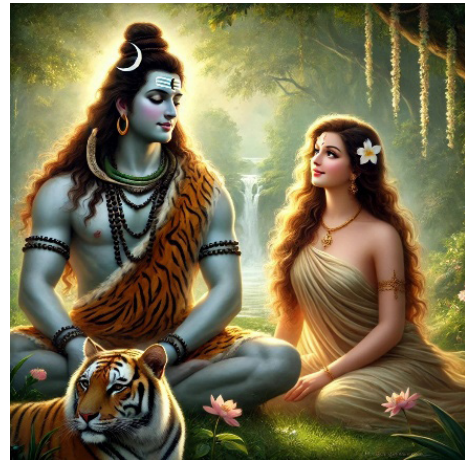
This imagery emphasizes the navel as the source of life and divine energy, connecting the physical body to the cosmic forces of existence and spiritual transcendence. The waist of the Devi, constantly in motion due to her endless acts of giving, represents the dynamic flow of her cosmic duties. Like a tree, which is steady and unmoving, her waist seeks rest to avoid the fatigue of perpetual motion. The presence of a golden pot near her waist symbolizes abundance, yet its weight adds to the strain. The laval creeper adorning her waist forms three delicate lines, which hold deeper symbolic meanings. The three lines on the Goddess's waist, symbolizing the three gunas—sattva (purity), rajas (passion), and tamas (inertia)—carry profound psychological and philosophical significance, aligning with both Samkhya philosophy and psychological theories. Philosophically, the gunas are the fundamental constituents of prakriti (nature), representing the forces that create, sustain, and transform the cosmos<sup>[15]</sup>. The waist, as the horizontal midpoint, represents the O Point in Advaita Vedanta, signifying balance and unity from which these energies emerge to shape the material world. Psychologically, the gunas reflect the emotional and behavioral forces within humans: sattva governs clarity and harmony, rajas drives ambition and creativity, and tamas fosters stability and rest<sup>[16]</sup>. Moreover, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the waist can symbolize the seat of primal instincts and creativity, with the three lines representing the balance

between higher aspirations (sattva), active desires (rajas), and grounding instincts (tamas), akin to Freud's id, ego, and superego<sup>[17]</sup>. The three lines also resonate with the three nadis (energy channels) in kundalini philosophy—ida, pingala, and sushumna—emphasizing the waist as the seat of energy balance, essential for spiritual and emotional harmony<sup>[18]</sup>. This interplay of cosmic and psychological elements illustrates the divine symbolism of the waist as the convergence of universal forces within the individual. The hips and loins of the Goddess Sakti are described as so vast that they encompass the entire earth, symbolizing her role as the cosmic mother, supporting and nurturing all of creation. Despite their expanse, they possess a divine lightness, reflecting her effortless grace and transcendence over physical burdens. Her thighs are likened to the trunk of an elephant, signifying strength and stability, while also resembling the stalk portion of a golden plantain tree, symbolizing beauty, softness, and vitality. Her knees are compared to the frontal globes of Airavata, the celestial elephant of Indra, embodying majestic power, balance, and divine splendour (verses 81 and 82).

The toenail tips of the Goddess Sakti are likened to ten sharp arrows, symbolizing precision and her ability to pierce ignorance and illusions. These nails are sharpened on the crowns of celestials bowing at her feet, a poetic metaphor for the reverence of divine beings polishing and enhancing her supreme power. Her deep red feet, glowing with radiance, owe their color to Viṣṇu's cūḍāmaṇi gem, which touches her feet as he bows in devotion, further glorifying her divine splendor. Even Gaṅgā, who purifies the world by washing away sins, subtly approaches her feet to cleanse herself, as she has absorbed the impurities of others.

The relationship between Śiva and Śakti is subtly conveyed here (**Figure 3**). While Śiva represents static energy and potential, Śakti, as kinetic energy, embodies creation, sustenance, and transformation. This reflects Śiva's realization that, though he holds ultimate stillness, he depends on Śakti's dynamic power to manifest and sustain the universe. Śiva's jealousy arises from his inability to independently create or sustain life, as even a momentary pause in his meditation could trigger annihilation. While Shiva and Shakti symbolize masculine and feminine principles, respectively, these energies are archetypal rather

than strictly biological, and each individual contains dynamic interplays of both, transcending simplistic gender categorization.



**Figure 3.** Parvati and Shiva depicted in a secluded forest setting, highlighting their retreat from worldly distractions into the serenity of nature. The natural backdrop symbolizes the harmony of static (Shiva) and dynamic (Shakti) energies within the universal rhythm. While the visual depicts one crescent for simplicity, the text refers to the esoteric dual crescent symbolism representing Shiva and Shakti's inseparable yet distinct cosmic roles.

Source: Generated by the Author Using ChatGPT. The image was manually directed, composed, and finalized to maintain alignment with traditional Hindu theological symbolism. No third-party copyrighted material was used. The author affirms that ethical standards concerning AI-generated content, originality, and scholarly transparency have been strictly observed.

The feet of the Goddess, once reduced to ashes in her form as Sati, are now adorned as Śakti, representing her resurrection and union with Śiva as Parvati. This transformation also reflects Śiva's sacrifice of Kama (desire) to win her devotion. Her anklets, emitting a rhythmic sound, symbolize envy and longing, reflecting the balance of emotions and energies between Śiva and Śakti. The Goddess's jeweled anklets, imitating their sound with every graceful dance pose, reflect her care for all beings, even subhuman disciples. Her swan-like gait symbolizes natural feminine beauty, yet nurture and refinement enhance nature's raw elegance, showing how grace and accompaniments complete and elevate inherent beauty. This perspective is rooted in the nature vs. nurture debate, a cornerstone of developmental psychology. From a psychological standpoint, nature represents the innate traits or abilities an individual is born with, such as physical characteristics, genetic potential, or temperament. However, these traits often require nurture—



external guidance, experiences, and cultural context—to reach their fullest potential. For example, a person’s natural aptitude for art or music may remain untapped without proper training, education, or exposure to the right environment.

According to Epigenetic Theory <sup>[19]</sup>, genes and the environment are interdependent, and environmental stimuli can either enhance or suppress the expression of innate abilities. Similarly, Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory highlights that learning and development occur through interaction with cultural tools, mentors, and the social environment <sup>[20]</sup>. Without nurture, the raw potential offered by nature might remain undeveloped or unrefined. This concept also resonates with positive psychology, where individuals are encouraged to develop their innate strengths (nature) through practices like education, mindfulness, or self-improvement (nurture) <sup>[21,22]</sup>. For example, a study by Dweck on the growth mindset found that fostering perseverance and learning strategies (nurture) could improve innate intelligence and performance (nature) <sup>[23]</sup>. Similarly, individuals born with natural beauty or talents benefit from additional refinement, training, and cultural nurturing to fully express their potential. Psychological theories such as Freud’s unconscious instincts, Vygotsky’s sociocultural development, and epigenetic influences illustrate the dynamic nature of human tendencies. When interpreted symbolically, these theories align with the central spiritual argument: that beyond biological or social conditioning, the ultimate goal of human evolution is transcendence of duality and realization of the unified Self (*Brahman*). Thus, the Goddess’s form not only reflects natural and psychological processes but also serves as a cosmic map guiding the seeker toward liberation.

Verse 92 poetically describes how Brahma, Vishnu, Ishvara, Rudra, and other cosmic powers are drawn to the Goddess’s divine essence, metaphorically likened to her couch—a symbol of surrender and reverence. Shiva, in this depiction, is veiled under a crystal canopy that reflects the Goddess Sakti’s radiance, transforming his pure, white brilliance into a magenta hue, symbolizing her dynamic energy and passionate vitality. This magenta light, representing erotic bliss (*madhurya rasa*), embodies the perfect union of Śiva’s static energy and Śakti’s dynamic power. Under this transformative light, Shiva becomes the

epitome of charm, captivating the universe with the balance of divine sensuality and spiritual unity. This verse (46) emphasizes the sacred union of Śiva and Śakti, symbolized by two crescent moons. In the esoteric traditions of Śākta Tantra and Kundalini Yoga, this union represents the highest state of spiritual realization, where the individual consciousness (*Jīvātman*) merges with the Supreme Consciousness (*Paramātman*) Śiva, the absolute stillness and transcendental awareness, is said to reside in *Parābindu* (the Supreme Bindu) at the *sahasrāra chakra* (the crown chakra) <sup>[24]</sup>. Meanwhile, Śakti, the dynamic and creative energy, ascends through the *suṣumnā nāḍī* in Her subtlest form as *Kuṇḍalinī*. The culmination of this ascent results in the sacred merger of Śiva and Śakti, an event that symbolizes the transcendence of duality and the realization of the non-dual nature of existence. The merging of Śiva and Śakti is not merely a metaphysical concept but a profound mystical experience described in various tantric and yogic traditions. It results in an outpouring of nectar-like essence, referred to as *amṛta* or *soma*, which signifies the state of ultimate bliss (*Paramahamṣaḥ*) <sup>[25]</sup>. This *amṛta* is said to descend from the *sahasrāra* into the lower chakras, rejuvenating the entire being. At this stage, the *sādhaka* (spiritual practitioner) attains the state of a true *Yogī*, marking the culmination of the spiritual journey. This state is characterized by complete inner stillness, divine wisdom, and liberation (*mokṣa*). The Kaula and Śākta traditions often describe this as the moment when the practitioner transcends worldly limitations and experiences divine ecstasy <sup>[26]</sup>. Advanced meditators can directly experience this nectar-like flow during deep states of meditation, especially when the higher chakras, particularly from *ājñā* (third eye) to *sahasrāra*, remain perpetually activated. In rare instances, this divine energy can overflow spontaneously, producing profound states of spiritual rapture and divine intoxication <sup>[27]</sup>. This nectar, known as the “nectar of Mercy”, is not merely a physiological or symbolic phenomenon but a divine blessing. It is regarded as the final sign of spiritual unity, marking the ultimate realization of the Self. The experience of *amṛta* is often likened to a sacred elixir that purifies the consciousness and confers immortality (*amṛtatva*) in the yogic tradition.

The Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā, and Yogic scriptures describe this experience using various terms. The

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad (1.2–1.7) speaks of Turiya, the “fourth state” of consciousness beyond waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, where pure awareness alone exists. Similarly, the Taittirīya Upaniṣad (2.1.1) describes the nature of ultimate reality as Sat-Chit-Ānanda (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss)—a state in which the meditator recognizes their eternal, infinite, and blissful nature beyond material existence. The Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (1.4.10) famously declares Aham Brahmāsmi (“I am Brahman”), affirming that the individual self and the cosmic absolute are one and the same<sup>[28]</sup>.

It is important to note that the present study follows a non-dualistic Śākta-Advaita approach to interpreting the *Saundarya Lahari*. However, other schools — such as Dvaita Vedanta and various Bhakti traditions — offer alternative readings<sup>[4]</sup>. In these frameworks, the Goddess may be seen not as a manifestation of absolute unity, but as a distinct divine being to whom the devotee relates through loving separation. These diverse interpretations underscore the theological richness of the text, and the approach presented here is offered as one among several valid streams within the broader Indic interpretive tradition.

For advanced meditators, the realization of Advaita is not merely a conceptual framework but an experiential awakening, cultivated through deep meditation (dhyāna), self-inquiry (ātma-vicāra), and detachment from the transient world. The practice of Neti-Neti (“Not this, Not this”), described in Advaitic teachings, helps the seeker systematically negate all that is impermanent and external, allowing them to rest in the pure, formless awareness of Brahman. This transcendence of duality leads to an irreversible shift in perception, where the meditator no longer identifies with the body, mind, or ego, but instead abides in the infinite, unconditioned consciousness that pervades all existence<sup>[29]</sup>. In this state, all distinctions—between subject and object, self and other, time and space—vanish, leaving only pure, boundless awareness. This is the ultimate goal of Advaita and the pinnacle of the yogic spiritual journey.

### 3. Conclusions

The Saundarya Lahari provides an intricate portrayal of the feminine form, symbolizing the dynamic and nurturing aspects of creation while embodying cosmic truths.

Each element of the Goddess’s form, from her eyes likened to cities to her waist symbolizing the three gunas, reflects a profound interconnectedness of beauty, nature, and divinity. Her union with Shiva, transforming static energy into creative dynamism, serves as the essence of cosmic harmony. The descriptions of her physicality are not merely poetic but carry metaphysical depth, illustrating the Advaita philosophy of oneness between the soul (jīva) and the universal consciousness (Brahman). The Goddess’s beauty is both the journey and the destination, guiding devotees toward liberation. By embracing her grace, humanity can transcend material boundaries, merging with the infinite and experiencing divine bliss, as symbolized through the imagery of her form.

Future studies may explore comparative symbolism of the feminine form across other Tantric or Bhakti texts to identify thematic continuities and divergences. Additionally, interdisciplinary engagement with contemporary feminist philosophy or cognitive aesthetics could deepen understanding of rasa and embodiment in devotional literature.

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