The Mother in Myth: Narratives of Trauma in Collective Memory

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Abstract

The archetypal image of the Mother in myth is a metaphor of the collective expression of the unconscious. The Lacanian separation from the Mother posits a dialectical trauma of the infantile collective memory articulated in myths. The Indian myths contain narratives of the maternal archaic imago, distinct from the narratives of the West. The distinction in these narratives with respect to obedience towards the father figure of authority while they seek union with the mother, marks a point of departure from the occidental narratives. This research paper segments these narratives through the attributes of ‘mother-son association’ and ‘mother-daughter association’ and juxtaposes them with parallel narratives of the West with the aim of interweaving the contradictory images to harness complementary aspects of a unified totality.

Keywords: Mother Archetype, Indian Myth and Collective Memory, Trauma, Lacanian theory on the mother

The mother has been revered as the most exalted aspect of a woman since the dawn of civilisation. The treatment of women with justice and fair play though uneven and inconsistent serves as a barometer of civilisation of societies, both ancient and new. The role

of a woman as the Mother, the shaper of the child-psyche and consequently of a much better world-psyche, stands out as the most redeeming role for a woman.

The Lacanian conception of the origin of being is closely related to the trauma of alienation from the mother which is the common stratum of myths both in the oriental and occidental narratives. In this context, myths in part, act as repositories of psychoanalytic material of the infantile consciousness of man grappling with the trauma of birth and the separation from the Mother.

The worship of Mother or Nature as a goddess, the primordial source of life, has been practised since the infancy of human existence. India has been the home of the worship of the Mother Nature as *Prakriti*, which later evolved into the goddess cult with deities such as – *Sakti* (Power), *Prithvi* (Earth) and a pantheon of tutelary deities or *Kuldevis* (such as *Mata*, *Amba*, *Amma*, *Kali*, *Karali*). This cult still survives as a living tradition and the worship of mother *Durga* during *Navratri* is a popular Hindu festival.

Many aspects of the Mother in Indian myths confirm to the generic image of the archetypal Mother. Though there are some typical features which differ significantly from the narratives of the West. The Jungian interpretation of the myth as the collective expression of the unconscious provokes an inquiry into the divergence of thought patterns between the East-West polarities, in this regard. This research paper seeks to examine the stated differences, on the basis of their classification into the attributes of ‘mother-son associations’ and ‘mother-daughter associations’.

The among the most deliberated subjects concerning ‘mother-son associations’ in the West comprise the tales of oedipal attachment, which are a rare occurrence in the Indian cultural tradition. Sigmund Freud worked on the Greek tragedy of Oedipus in his acclaimed theory of the Oedipus complex. Oedipus the king of Thebes was not aware of his parentage;

he accidentally killed his father king Laius and unknowingly married his own mother Queen Jocasta.

Upon learning that he had been blind to the truth metaphorically, he wounded himself and became blind, so as not to see his own children/siblings. Ironically, as he turned blind, he developed a prophetic vision, an insight into the clarity of things.

The Indian mythic narratives, do not offer prominent parallel myths of oedipal attachment, which possibly indicates the cultural reality or conservative expression of the contemporary times. The closest approximation are the narratives of sons acting as guards to protect their mother, even against their own father, like lord *Ganesha* defending goddess Parvati, but to whiff incest in any of these is unthinkable.

The near absence of oedipal undercurrents in the Hindu myths points towards - the absence of; or towards a successful resolution of the oedipal complex in the contemporary Indian society. It cannot however be ruled out that the myths remained silent on the taboos of the contemporary society and were hushed by the cultural dogmas. The possibility that the dark undercurrents of the unconscious, went unnoticed, unspoken, unwritten or were carefully edited out, cannot be eliminated.

Lacanian review of the tenets of the oedipal complex lead to the reconceptualization of the mother as the figure who instilled in the infant, the desire to be the phallus she desires. She is first conceived as fully present, then nearly wholly absent and is finally perceived as returning after a period of obstruction, under the phallic aegis. The Indian myths seem to correspond closer with the Lacanian reading of the Mother in comparison to the Western narratives with oedipal proclivity.

Most of the Indian mythic narratives involve a situation of ‘mother-son separation’ rather than connotations of oedipal union. Within this context, Kunti’s separation from Karna, her first-born son in *Mahabharata*, serves as a prominent illustration. The sage

Durvasa had blessed Kunti with a *magic* mantra to invoke any God and beget a son. The unmarried Kunti, who was curious to test the efficacy of the *mantra* invoked *Surya*, the Sun deity, who in turn blessed her with a son. But due to the social stigma of being an unwed mother, Kunti, could not acknowledge him. She placed him in a basket and drifted him away in the river Ganges. Kunti thus had to face the ordeal of separation from her son.

Later, she married Pandu and used the *mantra* to beget five sons from different deities, who were referred to as Pandavas in Mahabharata. The Pandavas were banished from their land for thirteen years and during this period Kunti remained separated from her sons, living as a widow in poverty. She expressly acknowledges that neither widowhood, nor poverty caused her as much affliction as the separation from her beloved sons.

However, neither Karna nor the Pandavas display anxiety in terms of wining over their mother Kunti from her husband Pandu, who was not their biological father. They may rather be interpreted as *manas-putra* or mind born allegorical sons of Kunti. The character of Karna in particular exhibits the stages of Lacanian oneness, separation and a reunion with the mother.

Further, the sons in the narratives of the West often challenge the figure of authority by bringing death of the father, and are marked by undercurrents of oedipal union with the mother-figure. Chronos castrated his father Uranus and was in turn killed by his son Zeus in the Greek myths. However, sons like Parashuram in the Hindu narratives, uphold the Lacanian paternal metaphor, where Parashuram could not defy his father's command and resorted to killing his own mother, whom he later revived when his pleased father agreed to grant him a boon and came full circle from the stage of absolute separation to the ultimate union.

The second aspect of the discourse involves the 'mother-daughter associations' the instances of which seem to be notably scanty. The Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone,

for instance recounts, the bond of mother and daughter relations. Demeter, the Greek goddess of fertility deeply loved her daughter Persephone which corresponds to the first stage of blissful union with the mother. However, the young Persephone was abducted by Hades, god of the underworld, which brings the trauma of separation in the narrative. Demeter became furious upon learning this and the crops and caused the flora and fauna to wither and a terrible famine gripped the earth.

Finally, Zeus commanded Hades to release Persephone but he tricked her into eating some pomegranate seeds, aware that if she ate anything from the land of the dead, she would have to return for a part of each year. Therefore, as per the myth, each year the growth of plants slows down when Persephone returns to underworld and the Earth goes green again when she comes back. The myth is suggestive of a reunion after a long period of traumatic absence from the mother and also hints at the cyclical nature of the saga.

The instances of ‘mother-daughter associations’ are limited in Hindu mythology. While the name of Lord Rama’s mother, Queen Koshaliya, is popularly known, very few may be familiar with that the name of his consort Sita’s mother, who is fondly remembered as the adopted daughter of King Janak. Sita’s identity is established by primarily by her father and she has been named Janaki after him. The legend focuses on the relationship between Sita and her father Janak and does not elaborate upon her bonding with her mother. Similarly, we fondly remember Krishna’s mother Yashoda (foster mother) and are familiar with his biological mother Devaki. There are several popular songs and poems about the deep affection between Krishna and Yashoda, that are sung even now. However, the ‘mother-daughter’ bonding between his consort Radha, or for that matter other female protagonists, is not elaborated upon in detail. The female protagonists are described in the narratives with respect to their role as dutiful daughters of exceptional fathers and their relationship with their mothers seems unworthy of mention. They remain worthy of adulation with respect to

their role towards a male counterpart – father, husband or brother, and are severely restricted towards attempting a reading into their own sexuality.

However, there are instances of exception to the norm like the myth of daughters of Daksh. Lord Brahma's son Prajapati Daksh had sixty daughters. One of them, Swadha was married to Pitras. They had three *manas-putris* i.e daughters born out of mind (*mann*) : Maina, Dhanya, and Kalavati. They went to meet Lord Vishnu. However the girls failed to acknowledge sage Sanatkumar, the powerful son of Lord Brahma. The infuriated sage cursed the three girls to be born in human form. However, they apologised and later he blessed them with a boon – three virtuous daughters will be born to each of the three girls and will bring them redemption. Eventually, Maina became the mother of goddess Parvati, Dhanya became the mother of goddess Sita and Kalavati became the mother of goddess Radha.

The overall position and status of daughters in the Indian society may provide some reasoning on this front. Since the ancient times the Indian society has been largely patriarchal and sons have been valued over daughters. A son did not migrate away from the family after marriage and has been cherished as the strength for a family ushering wealth, security, protection etc. The parents looked up to their sons depending upon him in their old age and gleamed with the promise of *nirvana*. But the daughter then, was more of a dependent. The birth of a son was like birth of light, bringing bliss; but the birth of a daughter was like the birth of desire, the root of misery.

However, the picture of contrary reality is projected particularly by text and practices adopted in ancient India which points towards evidence in the form of rituals and the cult of the goddess. Little girls are still worshiped in parts of India during *navratri* celebrations as manifestations of potential creative force. Moreover, if the social status of daughters alone offered explanation to our problem, then narratives dealing with daughters would have been swiped out altogether. The worship of deities in pairs such as Riddhi-Siddhi and Mahamaya-

Mahalaya, which is particularly practised in tribal communities of India, seems to offer an extension to the notion of ‘mother-daughter associations’.

However, the narratives on father-daughter relations do exist. The position of daughters has been weak in most of the contemporary societies, differing only in degree not in kind. For, instance the issue of women’s rights in England addressed by Austen through the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudiced* and sung aloud by Tennyson in *The Princess*, remind us that daughters have remained daughters, no matter where. Therefore, the subservient status of women alone does not offer a convincing argument.

The issue seems to stem from the conviction that the identity of a woman ought to be connected with a male member of her family. *Manusmriti* states that a woman’s father protects her in her childhood, her husband protects her in her youth and her sons protect her in her old age. While such statements are bound to provoke feminist friends to react, we must appreciate the milieu in which it was made. Besides, the point here is not to ascertain the validity of the statement but to employ it as evidence to our discussion. Thus, while a father, husband or son could protect the woman, her mother, belonging to the weaker sex herself, was not supposed to do so.

Therefore, with the rather optimistic belief that it was not dominion that sought to make women dependent on men; but the concern to protect her; from which such a theology was formed and which inevitably got distorted in practise down the ages, like the crumbling destiny of all philosophies.

Just as Adam offers his protective abundance to Eve, so does Manu. Even in Demeter’s tale, it is the father-figure Zeus and not Demeter who commands Hades to release Persephone. Thus it is very likely that the mother- daughter relationship is not explored in myths, based on the premise that a woman herself in need of protection, cannot offer the same to another woman. In this context, the myths can be viewed as a form of expression and

articulation to ensure safety and security in a society acting as allegorical instruction manuals to good conduct.

It follows that the ‘mother-son associations’ dominate the narrative discourse both in the East as well as in the West, which may be interpreted as the Jungian search for the anima. Further, it follows that the ‘mother-son associations’ in the West are marked by a greater proclivity towards the oedipal thought pattern than the Eastern counterpart narratives. The obedience towards the father figure of authority in the Eastern mythic narrative reflects the Jungian search for the animus.

The projection of the archetypal Mother-image in the Indian myths differs significantly from the narratives of the West. The Lacanian trauma of separation from the primal mother, finds expression in the infantile memory of the Indian mythic narrative. The complementary aspects of the narratives together converge to project the infantile trauma of the collective memory.

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