

Re-Engaging the Western Psyche: Shakti and the Divine Feminine Consciousness

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Abstract

The dynamics between power and gender is on the strongest note as with the imbalance in harmony between the sexes has given rise to a society, culture wherein the male assumes an upper hand in disseminating knowledge while female voices are relegated to the margins of the society. For centuries, women have been ostracized, demonized, and silenced so that they would always serve as purposeful means for men. However, with the advent of the third wave of feminism, feminists all over the world took to challenging and replacing retrogressive ideologies with ones that could instill faith in women for a brighter future. As a result, what was once regarded as the focal point of male power have started to open to women which includes religion. Power is no longer perceived on a one-to-one scale rather it is seen as a spindle around which revolves various social, cultural, economic, aspects. The western psyche which is predominantly masculine centered on western modes of thinking ought to be re- engaged by an eastern principle of spirituality, the coming together of the masculine and the feminine principles or the essence of Shakti, the ultimate Divine Being as mother of creation. In this paper, its historical origin, the evolution of the concept and lastly its significance in the current times shall be gleamed upon. How relevant it is to channel one's feminine principle in present times against the currents of a looming pandemic as it helps to attain individuation to become a psychic whole being?

Keywords- Spirituality, Jungian Psychology, Hindu culture

The word "Shakti" refers to "power or energy" thereby signifying consciousness that is one and whole. It's the divine mother that pervades and controls the entire universe. It is that which resides in each and every organism linking it to "the spiritus mundi" or the spirit of the world. Shakti is the experience and the fact that comprises the life-givingness of the universe. She is the many and the one who resides within the worshipper and the worshipped. The etymological origin of Shakti is from two words "shak" and "ti" which means to do and to act. As Frank Morales says The Sanskrit word Shakti can be translated as meaning "power" or "energy." It is derived

from the parasmaipada verb root "shak," which means "to be able," "to do," "to act." This power is witnessed in all the various phenomena of life. It is the force responsible for the growth of vegetation, animals and human beings. It is what is responsible for the movement of all things. The planets revolve around the sun as a result of Shakti. It is Shakti that makes the winds blow and the oceans churn. Shakti is manifest as the very affective ability of all the forces of nature. She is the heat of fire, the brilliance of the sun, the very life force of all living beings. In human beings, she is seen as the power of intelligence (buddhi), compassion (daya) and divine love

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(bhakti), among her many other functions It is the power of Shakti that "...keeps the gods in their position, makes a man virile or makes a sage of a man". Without the presence of Shakti, all creation would be rendered impotent. (201)

She is the All- being, the life sustaining creator of the world that moulds the time and existence of mankind. She is the great goddess of Hinduism that rules over several realms of thought, action and expression. She has been implored by Hindu women for granting fertility, wealth and longer lives for their spouses. According to Klaus Klostermaier, "...childless women implore her to conceive. In times of epidemics, it is the goddess who is implored to grant health and relief. Shakti has always been a living force throughout the long history of Hinduism" (199). The figure of the goddess appears several times in the *Rig Vedawho* is also known by several names as Ushus(goddess of the dawn), Saraswati (goddess of wisdom) Aditi (goddess without rebirth) and other 40 names. She is popularly regarded as the feminine principle and known by synonymously as Devi. She is mentioned and revered in various scriptures including Ramayana in which she is to be adored and worshipped while in Mahabharata, two hymns are composed in devotion to her. In every piece of literature pertaining to the Hindu religion, one would be astonished to find at least one mention of the goddess as the divine feminine .

Various schools of Indian Philosophy have defined Shakti differently as the Shankara school which perceived it as the cause and effect of a particular event while the Mimamsakhasviewed it as the innateness of everything in the world. However it was the Samkhyaswho defined "Shakti" as the perfectly harmonised form of the masculine

and the feminine. According to this, before life incarnate, there was matter (prakriti) and spirit (purusha). The former is immobile, immutable and pure by nature. It is what gives rise to the nature in all it's varied forms. While the latter give rise to animate and inanimate things, it is the former which fills them with life.

It is as a direct result of the devolution of this original material substance that the universe, with all its diversity of names and forms comes into being. Prakriti is seen as being the power of nature, both animate and inanimate. As such, nature is seen as dynamic energy. Prakriti is originally passive, immobile and pure potentiality by nature. It is only as a direct result of her contact with the kinetic Purusha that she unfolds into the variegations we see before us. The universe with all its diversity and multiplicity remains equated in the divine volition as conception before manifestation. It is manifested in the course of basic evolution, started under the influence of the creative volition of the Divine Mother. The Universal Mother in Her Absolute Self admits of no mutability, change or division. (91)

Moreovereven among Hindu gods, their feminine nature reside in their consorts. Without which, it is believed that there is no Krishna without Radha and Shiva without Shakti. The latter too cannot exist in vacuum so it is the energy of the complimenting god that it manifests in. The concept of "Ardhanareeshwara", the representation of god as half man and half woman is slightly akin to the Jungian anima and animus as the feminine consciousness in a masculine psyche and the masculine consciousness in a feminine psyche. As it is said

The relationship that is enjoyed between the gods and goddesses in Hinduism is one of the wielder of power (shaktiman, the masculine principle) and the power itself (Shakti, the feminine). Each is meaningless without the

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existence of the other. While the possessor of power is the guiding force as to the power's direction and purpose, it is the power itself which provides the ability to perform any task. To use a crude example, we might say that the deva is the computer while the devi is the electricity that makes the computer's functioning possible. Shaktiman is the principle that gives guidance and direction to power. Shakti is the vital, life-giving force of the god, as well as the personification of his particular power. (Morales 213)

There's also another creation myth that focusses on Krishna and Radha as the eternal pair from which is born the entire universe. According to this myth, Krishna, the sole creator is accompanied by Radha who is also his feminine principle. From their conjugal play, is born an egg from which every other creation generates. "Creation, then, is depicted in the *Devi Bhagavata Purana* as proceeding from Krishna, through Radha. The feminine, Shakti, is shown to be crucial and indispensable in the process of creation. This fact very clearly demonstrates the mutual dependence in which god and goddess hold one another" (45).

The relationship between the god and the goddess in Hinduism is that of a wielder and power itself. The first one referring to Shaktiman while the latter signifies Shakti, the energy or the vital force. This is the same with every god wherein the latter half accrues them with power. Without vinayaki, there's no Vinayak, similarly the power of Indra is derived from Indrayani. The former is the noun while the latter is the verb. Gender is used to stress the transactional relationship between "the sentient subject and the insentient instrument".

The sentient being seeks wealth, power and knowledge. The sentient being can be wealthy, powerful and knowledgeable. But wealth,

power and knowledge can neither create themselves, not sustain or destroy themselves. At a very philosophical and metaphysical level, these are gender-neutral ideas that are being communicated using gendered forms. Unfortunately, the form overpowers our mind and we start believing that the action 'is' masculine and the passive object 'is' feminine. Therefore, we assume that stories of Lakshmi are stories about women and stories of Shiva are stories about men, which is not what the Puranas are communicating. What they are communicating is this—the gods are within us, the goddesses are what we seek, consume and possess. The gods enable us; the goddesses sustain us. The gods activate us; the goddess is what we see. (*Shakti or Shaktiman*)

This duality, that of deva and devi, the body and potency exists on various realms of the universe. If this is true then, body is masculine while psyche or consciousness follows the feminine principle. A coming together of the two is the perfect formula for attaining individuation to achieve the highest level of knowledge and being. Shakti is the energy incarnate which is inherently present in macrocosmic as well as the microcosmic level. She is the divine, fluid, dynamic energy that rules our psyches. As the contemporary feminist author Elinor Gadon explains, "the truth of the Goddess is the mystery of our being. She is the dynamic life force within. Her form is embedded in our collective psyche. While she is primarily present as personified in woman, however, Shakti is also present in man" (Morales).

The union of the Shakti with Shiva gives rise to true individuation which is happens on a bodily as well as the psychic level. According to the Hindu yogic tradition, it can be achieved through kundalini yoga wherein shakti which is at the base of the spine unites with the energy in the brain,

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which is when true union of the masculine and the feminine psyches occur. As each chakra opens, self-realization and true liberation is initiated thereby giving rise to a balance between the masculine and the feminine principal. This has led to the rise of a specific cult called “Shaktism” mainly practiced in parts of West Bengal and Assam that focusses on recognising and worshipping the feminine principle which is most explicitly mentioned in the Vedic literature. According to Shaktism The world is not seen as being merely an illusion; it is in fact extremely real. In Shaktism, it is believed that Shakti (the goddess Prakriti) evolves her own being into 36 tattvas, or constituents of reality, in order to create the universe. The present diversified universe is nothing less than the creative manifestation of the uncreated goddess Prakriti, or Shakti. Prakriti, both in the form of this world and the human body is in fact the vehicle for salvation. In practice, Shaktism stresses the sacramental nature of the human body due to its being the locus of spiritual unfoldment. For Shaktas, as for the majority of Hindus, women are greatly respected as being the personifications of Shakti in human, and therefore very spiritually accessible, form. (Klostermaier 23)

The cultural and strong spiritual ideals espoused by the Hindu religion states that man in spite of the gender he/she is required to confirm holds a different and varied psychic identity which might be masculine or feminine, undictated by their bodily gender. Rationalism, toughness and stubbornness dictated by masculinity is unrelated to the physical characteristics of a person as it is possible that one’s psyche acquires a different identity to a woman who is often stereotyped to be delicate, nurturing and calm.

Unlike what is observed in western literature, Indian mythic literature is full of references of

strong female characters including Draupadi and Sita who are seen to have exercised freewill and agency when it comes to major crossroads in their lives. For example, we find, Sita choosing a husband of her own will in a swayamvara conducted for selecting a spouse. Even afterwards, she persuades Rama to follow the golden deer through the forests. Her independent nature, though not portrayed in its entirety is more than any woman has been made to portray in western literature.

It has also been noted that in the ancient Vedic texts there are references of female rishis called “Acarya”(female teacher) and “Acaryani”(wife of a female teacher) who were given the sacred thread which was only presented to those who occupied the highest echelons of the caste and class hierarchy. It is mentioned in the texts of Panini that

Such women saints as Andal and Mirabai were leaders of the devotional Bhakti movement that initiated the religious liberation of women [and] was largely promoted and supported by women devotees. Women have continued this long tradition as leaders of various Hindu communities to this day. Such examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the forms of GurumayiChidvilasananda, Amritanandamayi, and Meera Ma, among many, many others (Johnsen, 1994). Considering that Indian culture has always been a culture in which religion has always been the most important social institution in society, it is no small accomplishment for women to have risen so high in the echelons of Hindu leadership. (*Ashtadyayi*)

In texts of Hindu culture, we find women been given great amount of reverence and space when compared to women in christianity, wherein they are relegated to mere position as worshippers and not as the “shaktiman” let alone “shakti”. Their absence is left uncompensated largely which has resulted in

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women being denied freedom and independence in the western psyche which has led to largescale destruction of the environment and everything synonymous with the feminine and femaleness.

In an crystal-clear display of the ancient concept of Shakti coming full circle to occupy the center stage of current academic debate, it has finally been recognized that the feminine aspect of the very Divinity Him(Her)self has been too long neglected. In the works of such people as Matthew Fox and Vicki Noble, we are now witnessing a call for the reemergence of the concept of the sacred feminine power of God, of Shakti. In such interesting developments as these, I venture to say that we are not so much witnessing the "Hinduization" of Western thought, as we are the rediscovery of the feminine principle as an integral and inseparable part of our very being. (Vandana Shiva 21)

The energy of the psyche is not just a cultural force rather if it is perceived individually, culturally, symbolically, then it has the power to seep into our psyches and restructure the current dilemma which seem to affect our deepest tendencies and habits that has resulted in large-scale collision between nature and culture also while structuring the other major dichotomies. The proper channeling of this

energy will not only upend them but also regulate and restructure the current society ideals for the betterment of our world and our future.

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