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Symbolism and the Sacred Feminine: Cultural Expressions of the Mother Goddess

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The picture of Mother Goddess portrayed in the murals, the kalams, and in the folk performances are undoubtedly the religious symbols which the believer carries in his psyche. They are born out of man's experience, and have the capacity to speak to man of many things. The Bhagavathi is generally represented in red, the symbol of life blood; The folk performances in general are observed at night in the midst of vibrant music and colour which instills a sense of fear and awe in the observer. It reminds the believer that he should live a life of righteousness or else he would be punished.

Religious symbols are denotative and they point to a specific object, event or person. According to Thomas Fawcett: "Religious symbols are social Phenomena arising out of the life and work of a society and having validity only within that society. They are not created but born out of life."[i].Every symbol opens up levels of reality for which non symbolic expression is inadequate. Fawcet is of the opinion that a symbol operates because it bears a relationship with that which is symbolized. Paul Tillich opines that the religious symbols open up a level of reality which is otherwise not opened at all. He calls religious symbols 'the depth dimension of reality'[ii], The dimension of reality which is the ground of every other dimension and every other depth. It is the level below all other levels because it is the most fundamental level.

Paul Ricoeur defines symbols as:" Any structure of signification of which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first."[iii] By opening up the in-depth dimension of reality the religious symbols unleash a psychic energy which can be used for destructive purpose as well as for positive action like socio-cultural change. The symbolism posess a material and dynamic component.

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They take hold of the human personality as a whole, arouse it and fascinate it and attract conciousness, which strives to interpret them.[iv]

A vast number of forms, symbols and images of views, aspects and concepts, which exclude one another and overlap, which complement one another and apparently emerge independently of one another, but all of which are connected to one archetype, and it pours in on to the observer what the archetype is. In addition to its striking similarities, it also carries marks of symbolic polyvalence. The archetype that developed among the primitive men in their cave paintings later became more developed in the form of conscious rituals.

According to Edmund Leach, a ritual is a culturally defined set of behaviour. It is synonymous with human symbolic behavior, regardless of its explicit religious, social or other content.[v] Religious rituals are equated with neurotic compulsions and its symbols to psychological complexes or genetically linked archetypes. Anthropologists like Clifford Geertz (1973) and Victor Turner (1977),'who are interested in explicit religious meaning of ritual symbolism, point out that ritual acts do endow culturally important cosmological conceptions and values with persuasive emotive force, thus unifying individual participants into a genuine community'. According to Mircea Eliade, for example "ritual arises from and celebrates the encounter with the 'numinous' or 'sacred', the mysterious reality that is always manifested as of wholly different order from ordinary or 'natural' realities. Religious persons seek continual contact with those realities, and to flee or to transform the inconsequential banality of ordinary life, thus giving rise to repetitions and 'archetypal nostalgias' of rituals"[vi] Patterson defines rituals as the formalized behavior patterns, methods of communications, verbal and non - verbal, necessary for the establishment of relations among members of a group or between groups; for, the relations among organisms of any kind are governed to a large extent by the forms of communications, both expected and required.[vii] According to Nancy Munn " Rituals are a generalized medium of social interaction in which the vehicles for constructing messages are iconic symbols (acts, words or things) that convert the load of significance or complex socio –cultural meanings embedded in and generated by the ongoing processes of social existence into a communication currency. In other

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words, shared socio-cultural meanings constitute the utilities that are symbolically transacted through the medium of ritual action."[viii] JJ Pallath defines rituals as the symbolic behavior patterns, method of communication, verbal and non-verbal, with reference to a transcendent power to evoke any or all emotions(navarasas) in the performer as well as in the community leading to catharsis. Rituals are dynamic expressions of the ethos of the performing culture.

The present topic does not confine itself to a small canvas, and it demands a multi-disciplinary approach. Since the worship of Bhagavathi as a deity is wide spread and constitute both classical and folk aspects, analysis of the various aspects are done with caution. Approaches like psychoanalysis and feminist theory are applied within the general framework of cultural studies to ensure an in-depth analysis of symbols and myths. Our fundamental assumption of the symbol system is philosophical and anthropological.

PSYCHO ANALITICAL APPROACH

For the psychologists the unconscious is the source of all dreams, symbols and myths."From certain point of view, we may say that that the first systematic analysis and exegesis of these 'alien' worlds of the unconscious from which the symbols and myths arise were affected by Freud"[ix]For Freud the nature of the symbol was always sexual. Freud saw all symbols, whether in dreams, myths or art as primarily sexual in nature and also as being a generalized expression of a particular object. Caves, pits, bottles and similar objects were said to represent the female organs; Pencils umbrellas or swords and other pointed objects represent the male organs; while queens, kings and other figures of authority represent the mother and father figures[x] In the psychology of C.G. Jung the personal unconscious (in the Freudian sense) is only a relatively insignificant fraction of the total marks of unconscious material. That which lies below the personal unconscious is known as collective or racial unconscious, since it contains the collective beliefs and myths of the race to which the individual belongs. The deepest level of collective unconscious is the universal unconscious common to the whole humankind. According to Jung, behind every particular symbol there lies an archetypal symbol. He moves from a particular to a generalized idea of symbol as against the theory of Freud. In this study, we make an

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extensive use of the idea of archetype and the unconscious, the insights of Jung and Freud. The complex configurations of religious symbols are separated into archetypal units employing a psychological approach. Our effort here is to show that similar archetypal symbols, myths, religious symbols and behavior patterns retained in various geographical areas in the broad canvas gives an insight of the social set up of the pre -modern period.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, described semiology as a science which studies the life of signs in the heart of social life. It described what the signs consist of and the laws that govern them. Language is such a system of sign expressive of ideas.[xi]

The structural analysis of myths by Levi-Strauss (1970) is a successful application of semiological insights into myths. Structural analysis of Myths can be considered as a particular case of semiology in Anthropology. Structuralism has asked how meaning is constructed by means of the conventions and codes of language in the signs, myths or symbols. Hermeneutics has asked how understanding the other is possible whether the other is a text or a different language or an alien culture or at a different point in time. Myth is one of the four modes of communications. The other are: economic exchanges, kinship exchanges by means of women and languages, together with its music and rhythmical sounds. Just as the elements of language are meaningless in isolation, the elements of myth – the individual narratives, persons or objects are meaningless in themselves and only take on significance through their relation with each other. But it is not the formation of a mere narrative as such that is significant, rather it is the underlying structure of a language that gives it significance as a means of communication. "The variant versions of the myth may show changes in the surface meaning but the structure and basic relationships will often remain constant. Yet this significant structure is usually in tribal societies at least an unconscious one which does not prevent it from reflecting popular preoccupations with social or seasonal contradictions." [xii] Levi-Strauss maintains that the content of the myth is irrelevant. Within a myth, a structure can reveal itself at different levels, or by means of different codes.

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An enquiry into the popular belief as means of collecting information requires an in-depth treatment of variables, and accordingly the method of data collection chosen here is observation and analysis of the various symbols and beliefs and interview of Scholars in this field.

Religion has twoway relationship with culture. In its visible and institutional aspects, religion may be viewed as one segment of culture along others such as social, economic and political organization. It also reveals itself through systems of communication and aesthetic expressions. Cultural processes are interesting because they are the medium within which powerful social relationships are played out and possibilities for social betterment are opened up or closed down.[xiii] Individual and collective identities are seen as problematic issues as they are understood as being always created under social pressures.

Culture is the source of social cohesion and belongingness. Different questions about culture have focused attention on standardization or convergence. Inequalities in the society have appeared so systemic and entrenched that they have seemed to produce and reproduce themselves almost automatically in the folklore and myths of an area. Economic disparity and other forms of coercion, and propaganda becomes an ideological manipulation. The critique of the dominant aims to secure the representation of the marginalized or the subordinate groups, spaces or themes in various ways.

Culture is not primarily the product and property of a group or a class, but rather a level or aspect of social organization, domination and resistance. They are sources of meaning, power, identity and subjectivity.

According to Geertz (1973;89), "culture denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" [xiv] Symbols in both religion and culture are storehouses of meaning, their meanings can be stored in religious symbols and dramatized in rituals. According to Tillich (1968:59)" religious symbols open up the experience of the dimension of this depth in the human soul "[xv]They open up a level of reality which is otherwise hidden.

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Human beings attach great significance to symbolic expression in their day-to-day life. Even in situation such a untouchability, caste suppression, poverty and misery, men and women celebrate their life through symbolic expression revealed in mythological extravaganza folk songs and rituals. All through history the myths and symbols inspired people and were dreams of paradise or a vision of a utopia. It also reflected their social life and institutions.

The connection between cultural studies and popular culture calls for the questioning of dominant structures that existed in the society. The concern for the relation between culture and power has reconfigured a critical political theory addressed as 'politics of truth'.[xvi]

Analytical psychology speaks of the primordial images or archetype of the Great mother, it refers not just to the image existing in space and time but to the inward image at work in the human psyche. The symbolic expression of this psychic phenomenon is to be found in the figures of the Great Goddess represented in the myths and artistic creations of mankind. The effect of this archetype may be followed through the whole of history, for we can demonstrate its working in the rites, myths, symbols of early men and also in the dreams, fantasies and creative works, as well as the sound of the sick man of our own day.[xvii]

In order to explain what analytical psychology means by an 'archetype' we must distinguish its emotional and dynamic components, its symbolism, its material component and its structure. The dynamic, the effect of the archetype is manifested in energetic processes within the psyche, processes that take place both in the unconscious and between the unconscious and consciousness. This effect appears for example in positive and negative emotions, in fascinations and projections and also in anxiety, in maniac and depressive states, and in the feeling that the ego is overpowered. Every mood that takes hold of the entire personality is an expression of the dynamic effect of an archetype, regardless whether this effect is accepted or rejected by the human consciousness; whether it remains unconscious or grips the consciousness.

Archetypes have the Jungian sense: all human beings possess similar inborn tendencies to form certain general symbols, and that these symbols manifest

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themselves through the unconscious mind in myths, dreams, delusions and folklore. Jung has substantiated his theory by deducing evidences of general symbols of the sun, the animus and anima (idea of man in a woman and vice versa), the mandala, the tree and many others. These occur as a matter of experience constantly in myths and dreams, and therefore must have some general collective origin.[xviii] As pointed out by Robert Briffault, "Although personified abstraction is foreign to primitive thought, the primal mother partakes from her very nature of an abstract character as a prototype of motherhood in general"[xix]

Cultural processes are interesting because they are the medium within which powerful social relationships are played out and possibilities for social betterment are opened up or closed down.[xx] Individual and collective identities are seen as problematic issues as they are understood as being always created under social pressures.

Culture is the source of social cohesion and belongingness. Different questions about culture have focused attention on standardization or convergence. Inequalities in the society have appeared so systemic and entrenched that they have seemed to produce and reproduce themselves almost automatically in the folklore and myths of an area. Economic disparity and other forms of coercion, and propaganda becomes an ideological manipulation. The critique of the dominant aims to secure the representation of the marginalized or the subordinate groups, spaces or themes in various ways.

The representation of the Goddess in the ferocious form with bulging eyes and tongue drawn out creates a feeling of awe. The powerful Goddess is often represented as punishing an evil person – and it represents the victory of good over evil.

The worship of the female principle in nature is an old tribal vestige and many of the primitive Goddesses were propitiated with animal sacrifices. This custom was curiously modified under the influence of Brahmanism, which has imputed that the shedding of blood is low and irreligious. The myths and legends associated with these folk Goddesses were connected with the folk beliefs and folk lore of the areas to which they belong. The ritual art forms like Theyyam, Padayani, Mudiyettu,

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Kalamezhuttu, Thottampattu and forms of worship throw much light on the worship of the Bhagavathy as a deity.

As a result of Brahmanical influence many of the aggressive Goddesses of the primitive folk of the Pre –modern period was transformed to more refined and graceful Goddesses like Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and Saraswathi, the Goddess of learning and art. Even though most of these Goddesses had individual powers some of them were relegated to the position of consorts of the important Aryan Gods- Vishnu and Shiva. This transformation may perhaps be due to a shift to a male dominated society.

The dominance of the mother or the mother forming family centre- in matriarchate and the social and economic supremacy of the female in primitive social evolution perhaps made the Mother Goddess very dominant in most pre-modern societies.But Eric Neumann in his Psycho analytical study of the Great mother points out that the dominance of the archetype of the Great mother constellates the human psyche of the primordial situation in which consciousness develops only slowly and only gradually emancipates itself from the dominions of unconsciousness directing process. Further he says that "it remains irrelevant whether the female or male group or as we believe both were the psychic vehicles of the archetype. The archetype of the Great mother Goddess can take form in a patriarchal society, as conversely as that of the father God can take form in a matriarchal society. [xxi]

But in Kerala we see the popularity of mother Goddess existing in a more or less matrilineal background. The importance of the Goddesses may have raised the status of women and at the same time the importance of the mother may have contributed to the popularity of the Goddess. The role of the woman and that of the Goddess may have been complementary.

Agricultural communities even today have to live in a state of uncertainty. In addition to flood, drought and other natural calamities, they also have to contend with the oppression of the privileged class, the landlords, the money lenders and others. Perhaps these persons were represented in the conception of the demons vanquished by the Goddess. The Goddess had to fight against natural disasters and against the privileged class in order to secure the agricultural yields for her

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worshiper. In fact everywhere tyranny and oppression have given rise to the ethical concept of the conflict between good and evil and the final triumph of the former over the latter. This is represented in Devi's fight against the demons.[xxii]

The Jungian analyst Esther Harding hoped that that the ancient near eastern Goddesses myths might help contemporary women move beyond identification with either the traditionally feminine or masculine roles and attributes. Marya Gimbutas whose works combines archaeology, comparative mythology and folklore uses her sensitivity to reconstruct what the artefacts meant to their makers and users. Impressed by the enormous preponderance of female figurines found at worship sites and graves in Neolithic Europe she concluded that despite the great variety of forms, all were aspects of one great goddess, worshipped not as an erotic object but as parthogenetic source of all life.

The close link of theyyam with the vegetation and its personification represents the first stage of 'earth mother' veneration. It is followed by the worship of kali and shakthi. The shakthi cult seems to be the last stage of evolution of the feminine worship. The moochilot Bhagavathy, thottumnkara Bhagavathy, puthiya Bhagavathy and makapothi illustrates the shakthi cult. The ritual offering of animals`is an important ritual in theyyams particularily in some of the Bhagavathy theyyams. The dress of the velichappad, the earrings, the anklets and the ornaments are all the reminiscent of the appearance of women of the old. There is close relationship between Bhagavathy and the mother goddess of the primitive people. People venerated the Bhagavathy for agricultural gains. The studies on totem show the close relationship between the primitive people and animals. Totemism is rooted in the primitives' sense of deep kinship with animals and other objects other than human. Animals like cock, tiger, snake, wolf and bear are represented in the artforms of most tribal people.

The symbol and myth of animal theyyam is incorporated in Saiva tradition. In the make-up of the theyyams, in facial decorations and the decoration of the headdress. In the theyyam celebration the serpent worship is well represented. The nagakanni, nagapothi are bhagavathies with serpent symbolism. This facial decoration is known as nagamthathezhuthu, Some of the theyyam myths are linked with serpent.

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The face is given most elaborate decoration and sometimes a face decoration takes three to four hours for the makeup. Even in Indian classical art and religion, the face is the index of the soul. Theyyam make up does everything to make the face prominent by the way of elaborate and intricate patterns and designs.

Primitive men had made use of art performances for propitiation of God, fulfillment of desire, eradication of the evil influences of the spirits, attainment of off springs and for the cure of the diseases. They reveal folk life

Here my intention is to show how the various aspects of the symbolic representation of the Goddess in Kerala points to the psychological aspects of the society. The various aspects of the worship of the Bhagavathi both historicize moments and it itself becomes historicized and is inserted into historical contexts. By investigating into the verbal and artistic representation of the of classical and folk tradition, performance arts and modes of remembrance about the worship of the Bhagavathi, my intention is to create a dialogue between the past and the present and find out how this dialogue in turn constructs a portrayal of the past. The consciousness of the past and its portrayal is as much reflected in the myths and practices of the present day.

Both the agricultural sickle and the Bhadrakali's weapon her icon the sword are made of iron , very durable and strong and has the power to repel and destroy evil spirits. The bhagavathi's sword has somewhat elongated handle while compared to the sickle used in agricultural operations. The sword which represents the bhagavathi receives worship in the in temple rituals and is often said to shake or shiver of its own accord.

The expression, Shakthism is derived from the word Shakthi which means power both latent and manifest. The Devi shakthi is the power aspect of the supreme spirit. The doctrines and ritual of shakthism are contained in a special branch of Holy Scriptures called Tantra sastra, which acknowledges the authority of the great Veda.[xxiii]

It must be understood that every great Indian Philosophical system has it's own cosmogony of Shakthism. It must be understood that every great Indian Philosophical

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system has it's own Cosmo-genesis, that is its special conception of the evolution of the world and it's beginning. As a matter of fact every conception of life and universe requires such a foundation to give it the necessary firm hold. For Shakthism this source, out of which the universe as mind and matter has evolved, is the female spiritual power, Shakthi.

In her most concentrated form, when her power is just ready to expand, a point called Bindu represents her. This Bindu point is mere spirit. Everything created and manifested in this universe has spirit as its source and essence.

In a diagrammatic way this cosmogenetic evolution can be represented like this. The active most concentrated point Bindu is red, the color of activity. From this point the lines of evolution expand through the stages of life and mind towards matter, the mineral world. So the material world stands not first but last in the evolution of the universe.

According to the general doctrine of Indian Metaphysics, this whole created universe is not everlasting but will one day be dissolved. The life or appearance of the universe lasts, as it is figuratively expressed, one day of Brahma, the Almighty, that is, millions and millions of years. After that the whole expansion contracts again and in the opposite direction; first matter will be dissolved, then life and mind will be dissolved, then life and mind will disappear till it reaches the state of the beginning, the spiritual point, Bindu, where it will find its rest; until the dawn of a new day of Brahma, when a new creation will start. This Bindu point is the great Goddess, the universal Mother the creator and receiver of the universe, which as Shakthi is worshipped by the followers of Shaktism

So the whole world has, as its creative power Shakthi, the Goddess, Just as in this world the female element is constantly maintaining it. But she the creative Goddess can do nothing without him, the God, Shiva. The relation of Shakthi to shiva is of a very subtle, spiritual nature. He is the underlying pure consciousness, which is independent of, and superior to all creation in a very famous picture of Shaktism the goddess Shakthi stands black colored on the white colored Shiva who lies inert. The symbolism is this –Shiva is white to represent a colorless form, since all colors belong to the created world, which is the domain of Shakthi. He lies at absolute rest,

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since movement and activity belong to the created world, which is dependent on him. She the Goddess is black colored because, compared with the light of the spiritual world unmixed with any objective realization, she is dark as the night; in all creation she is veiled in darkness.

Here my conclusion is that the Goddess is represented in Folk and Classical Hinduism with special traits, and psychoanalytical study of these symbols offer a myriad of ideas of the feminine aspect of worship.

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