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THE MALE-FEMALE SYMBOLISM IN RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

I. Introduction

Symbolism is used as a kind of key to convey religious concepts, ideas and events. Symbols have been utilised by all religions of the world from time immemorial. The word symbol comes from the *Greek* word *symbolon* means a token and a means of identification. Human beings are the most wonderful art works of God and they contain a good number of elements as in the case of any art works. Man comes to see himself as a symbol so far as he is conscious of his being. Only human beings can use and understand a symbol. When we delve into various religious literatures, we notice the attempts of man to verticalize his horizontal experiences of male-female differentiation. Is it inevitable that man should articulate his experience of the deeper dimensions of the real in terms of those realities which are intimate to him in his own self? Most of the Religious texts speak of God as a male personality. However, the feminine share in the creative act of God had been the object of wild speculations from the pre-historic times. The *Theogony of Hesiod* conceives *Uranus*, the earliest Supreme Greek god as the father and *Gaea* as the mother of all gods as well as other creatures. In India, the *Rg. Veda* considers *Dyava* and *Prthvi* as the creative source of everything. There is an episode in the *Brahadaranyaka Up.* where *Purusha* becomes a pair of male and female to create every species of animals (Br. Up. 1,4,3-4). In the Bible *Yahweh* was father, mother, friend and bridegroom for the Israelites. A similar situation arises as regards Christ's relation to the Church and to the members of the Church. In this paper, we would like to shed light on some important texts from Pre-vedic and Vedic periods, and the New Testament concept of man and woman with the background of Old Testament and Jewish law. Our aim in this paper is to show that the understanding and belief of those people of the ancient time in a God, conceived as male and female, who reconciles the opposites demands a better perception and a redefining of God, Church and the human society where the equality of men and women is reassured.

II. Pre-Vedic Period

The history of Dravidian people of India takes us to the fact that as an agricultural group they clearly worshipped deities connected in one way or the other with fertility. Phallic worship, typified in the seals found at Harappa, show us a God seated with legs crossed and wearing bull's horns (a bull being a universal symbol of male potency) and the cult of mother goddess showing a goddess before whom a human sacrifice is performed.¹

The Dravidian beliefs were deeply entrenched in India to survive the changes brought about by the successive waves of Aryan invasion. The graceful *Yakshi* and *Yaksha* figures symbolize the female and male deities, associated with trees and water. In the *Tantric* tradition the female principle of voluptuous activity is the motive force that sustains the universe. Without the female principle, the male principle is static and the transcendental potentiality would remain inert.

III. The Vedic Period

The Vedic Hymns bring into light a number of gods and goddesses to whom are addressed most of the vedic hymns. *Varuna*, the guardian of the cosmic law and the universal monarch is pictured as the creator of the universe. *Prthvi*, and *Dyaus* were symbolized as cow and bull. They were worshipped as fertility gods. *Prthvi*, the heroic female and *Dyaus*, the vigorous god, were the parents of Indra. *Ushas* was their daughter and *Agni* was their son. *Indrani* was chosen as the wife of Indra. *Ushas* inspired some of the most beautiful hymns. We see a number of gods and goddesses in the Vedic period and they all symbolize the male and female figures: Rudra (M), Ratri (F), Vishnu (M), Aswins (M), Sarasvati (F), Savitri (F), Vayu (M), Agni (M), etc.²

One may notice that there was no one Supreme Lord in the Vedic period. So one of the greatest preoccupations of the Bramanic age, in contrast to the Vedic, was the search for a one Supreme Being. Thus *Brahman* was considered to be the Supreme Deity. He wanted

1. Veronic Ions, *Indian Mythology* (New Delhi: The Standard Literature Co., Ltd.), p. 12.

2. Veronica Ions, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-27.

to create all the living beings from his own body. He divided his body into two parts, one half *male* and the other half *female*.³ And thus both male and female principles together create all beings in the universe.

The position of women in the *Dharma Sastras* and in the *Manusmṛiti* of Manu is one of complete subjection. The husband was not to eat with his wife; women were forbidden from the study of Vedas, and they must always depend on their husbands. The wife must worship her husband as a god. Women were credited with many inbred evils. It was believed that when unfaithful to her husband, she is born as a jackal in the next life and was tormented with diseases.⁴

In short, the complementarity and co-operation of both male and female principles are clearly depicted in the above-mentioned religious literatures. Man of vision could accept and appreciate the roles that each sex had to play in the natural order and he could attribute the same to the spiritual order. The value of male-female complementarity is clearly pictured in *Siva* and *Sakti*.

IV. Siva and Sakti : The Male-Female Symbolism in Hinduism

In medieval and modern Hinduism, Siva is considered to be the Supreme Deity, the Absolute and the universal creator and destroyer of all things. In the *Rg. Veda* Rudra Siva is a god of anger and fear; he is also the divine physician and his hand is soothing, healing and cool. The significance of Siva is that he is the reconciliation of all opposites: he is both creator and destroyer, terrible and mild, good and evil.⁵

The mythology of Siva is fully developed in the *Mahābhāratha* and in the various *Purānās* dedicated to him or to his symbol. He is one who clad in tiger skin whose neck is enriched with a necklance of skulls. He is ascetic and his austerities are prodigious. At the same time his is the 'Lord of Dance'. His constant companion is a white bull (*Nandi*) and his consort is *Parvati*.

3. Veronica Ions, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

4. G.T. Bettany, *Encyclopaedia of World Religions* (Dorset Press, N.Y. 1988), p. 213.

5. Ref. *Rg. Veda*, 1. 43. 4; 1. 114. 10; vii. 46. 2.

His consort is really only a part of himself; he creates, sustains and destroys by his *Sakti*. In *Sakti* cults, this power is worshipped to the exclusion of Siva himself as being active and committed side of his nature. It is common to the majority of Hindus that *Ardhanārīsvara* or Siva and his *Sakti* or female nature is a symbolic presentation of the "bridge building" nature of Siva.

In India, the feminine aspect of God is well explained through the concept of *Sakti*. Man has experienced from the beginning the biological ground of power in the fertility of the womb. This feminine power, *Sakti*, has revealed to man the Supreme Power, *Maha Sakti*. There are thousands of sculptures in the shrines of *Sakti* from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari. *Sakti* rightly counter-balances the over-masculinized Indian Trinity (*Trimurti*).⁶

Sakti, as a symbol, reveals the tender, gentle and comforting feminine dimensions of God. It is expressed in the representation of *Sakti* as mother, as virgin, as spouse and as the pieta.

Sakti as Mother

One's first understanding of woman is as mother; she conceives us, bears us, gives birth to us, cares for us. Mother is intimately connected with our biological as well as psychological growth. Hence it is not surprising that the bestower of life is symbolized quite universally through the mother. Poets and saints have sung her praises as *Sri Māta*. Sankarācharya, the great Vedanta philosopher of India, sings thus:

O Lady Supreme, may all the functions
of my mind, be thy remembrance;
may all my words be thy praise;
may all my acts be an obeisance unto thee.⁷

Another extract where *Sakti* as mother is addressed in a situation of hopelessness:

Awake. O Mother, . . . thy helpless sons,
lean for want of food, worn out in the
struggle, are struck with terror at the way
in which they are being treated.⁸

6. See the Appendix in P.G. Loyle, *Studies in Devī Bhāgavata*, Bombay, 1973.

7. Haridass Bhattacharya (ed.) *The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. IV, (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1969, p. 661.

8. *Septasati* 4: 10, quoted in *Journal of Dharma*, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 182.

The theologians have described her as the origin of all, Brahman's energy, and in fact she is the mother of God: Brahman, Vishnu and Siva. She, unwilling to be alone, created this triune Purusha out of herself and everything else through her association with him.⁹

Thus the One, Infinite, Uncreated, God-the-Mother, is kindness incarnated. She is merciful, tender and nourisher. She abides in all beings as a mother who is both benign and fearful and all contradictions merge in her.

Sakti as Virgin

Sakti is often depicted as a virgin (*Kumāri*). Virginity is an important stage of a female in her growth to womanhood, particularly in Indian culture. Woman related to a man as a virgin has power (*sakti*) to renew and enhance his personality. In India people saw *Sakti* as the source of spiritual transformation. She is capable of liberating us from *avidyā* as she is the Queen of Wisdom. Since she is the illuminating power, she is described as the Word (*Sabda Brahman*). *Sakti* is, thus not only life-giving, (mother) but also life-transforming (the virgin). She is the *Virgo Mater* – Virgin Mother.

The multi-layered polyvalent *Sakti* symbolizes the basic "weltanschauung" of Indian religious thought. God has become more meaningful and quite intimate through *Sakti*. The Ultimate Reality is neither male nor female: It transcends our mode of being. But our conception of that power as *Sakti* brings out the supreme tenderness of God towards us without sacrificing his male firmness. Though the Absolute is trans-human and trans-sexual, it is the need of today to look into the feminine-maternal element in him.

When we come to the time of Orthodox Systems of Indian thought (*śāstra darsanas*) the male-female complementarity is clearly visualized by the symbols of *Purusha* and *Prakṛti* where importance of both the sex becomes more vivid and deep-rooted.

V. Purusha and Prakṛti: Male-Female Symbolism in the Indian Thought

The Indian mind understood *Purusha* and *Prakṛti* as the male and female principles and as the source of origin of everything. The term

9. Cf. A. Barth, *Religions of India*, London, 1882, pp. 199-200.

Purusha can be seen in the Vedas while the term *Prakrti* is seen for the first time in *Svetasvatara Upanishad*.

The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* describes *Prakrti* as the female unborn.

The female unborn is red, white, and black in colour and produces offsprings resembling her. By her side lies one unborn out of attachment to her.

(*Svet. Up. IV. 5*)

The unborn female is *Prakrti*, and the colours red, white, and black are the symbols of the three gunas, namely, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.

He (unitary Brahman) presides over the *Prakrti* in every aspect of her production and controls every form of production.

(*Svet. Up. V. 2*)

It is only under His guidance and presidentship that she can create her offsprings.

(*Svet. Up. IV. 11*)

Taking the cue from the *Mundaka Upanishad's* reference to *Purusha* as the seed-giver and *Akshara* as the *yoni* (*Mund. Up. II. 1, 2*), the *Purusha* is the seed-giver and the *Akshara* is the 'Yoni'. *Svetasvatara Upanishad* too calls the objective principle 'Yoni' (*IV. 11, V. 2*) and makes it a feminine principle by calling it feminine names such as '*Dēvātmasakti*', '*Māyā*', and '*Aja*'. This appears to be the origin of the feminine conception of *Prakrti* of the later philosophy. Thus we see a development from 'Brahman' or *Akshara* of the early philosophy and *Avyakta* (n) of *Katha Up.* to *Prakrti* (feminine) in *Svetasvatara Upanishad*.¹⁰

The old philosophy of *Prakrti* and *Purusha* forms the basis of the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. *Prakrti* is called *Mahad Brahman* in the *Gita* 14:3. It is said there that this *Prakrti* is described as being like the female part, which God charges with His energy for the creation of the universe. Wherever any living being may be born, the great Brahman or *Prakrti* is to be considered as the female part of God as the father and fertilizer.¹¹

10. K.B. Ramakrishna Rao, *Theism of Pre-Classical Samkhya* (University of Mysore: Prasaraṅga: University of Mysore, 1983), pp. 113-144.

11. S. Gupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. II, p. 462.

Purusha and *Prakrti* together constitute the whole reality. They are only two dimensions of the one reality. They cannot exist separately. They co-exist and complement. *Purusha* cannot act by himself and hence he needs *Prakrti* for his manifestation or self expression and for liberation. *Prakrti* being unintelligent can know nothing unless being helped by *Purusha*. The male principle needs the help of the female principle for enjoyment as well as for *Kaivalya*, while the latter gets direction and guidance from the former. *Purusha* without *Prakrti* is lame and *Prakrti* without *Purusha* is blind. Both co-exist and co-operate for performance of an action.

Both male and female are equally important in the sphere of existence, especially in the realm of human beings. Man and woman, by their very nature is one unity. The Hindu image of marriage of fire with water represents the joining of the unjoinable. The interlinking of man and woman may be taken as symbolizing the joining of all opposites: good and bad, high and low, cold and hot, wet and dry etc. A man alone cannot do everything by himself; he needs the valuable help of a woman. The weakness of one is compensated by the other thereby maintaining the equilibrium and harmony in life. However, we should accept and appreciate both parties' unique and specific role to be played in the drama of life. The lack of the presence of the other makes one's life miserable and unhappy. Together they constitute a panoramic vista of paradise. At the same time, it demands a great from both the parties. The great expression of love and sharing is experienced in self-emptiness and self-sacrifice. It is the story and message of the Bible.

VI. The Biblical Concept of Man and Woman

The whole story of Adam and Eve is a profound study of human nature. In fact, when we consider that the word Adam is not a proper name, but a noun meaning "man" or "mankind" in a generic sense, the story becomes quite personal. Adam, as the supposed great Progenitor of the human race is made in the image of God. "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen.1:27). Man is created as a unity which includes both male and female. Man and woman are both equally created in the image and likeness of God; together they are called "man" and form one unit (Gen. 5:2).

VII. The Jewish Law

In many spheres, the Rabbinic law recognized the equality of men and women; they are subjected to the same laws, religious prohibitions, and penalties. Father and mother deserve the same honour (Exod. 20:12) and respect (Lev. 19:3). Widows to be treated with special consideration. Nevertheless, in many areas, it is taken for granted that men and women are meant to be different in status, rights, and obligation and to complement rather than equal each other. Corresponding to their endowments and relationship in nature, men are assigned functions which are active, protecting and outgoing. According to Rabbinic law, women are not eligible for ecclesiastical office and positions of authority in general.¹² The Jewish law urged man never to hurt the woman or to bring her to tears. The virtues of women are supposed to shine within the home. As the Psalmist says: "All the glory of the King's daughter is within the palace" (Ps. 45:14). Again Proverb 12:4 says: "Wife is the crown of her husband."

In a close examination, one may notice the description of woman as the property of the man in Judaism. It reflects the male dominance in late Judaism. In consequence, women are restricted to the home. They serve as a symbol of evil as one may see it in the classical exegesis of Genesis ch. 3. It is not justifiable to ascribe the responsibility of the fall of humanity to one individual or one section of human race because of their weakness and inferiority. "The whole story of Bible and that of humanity points to the plain truth, namely, the Almighty, is always with the sides of the weaker section." "He has shown strength with his arm. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree" (Lk. 1:51, 52).

VIII. The Motherhood of the Holy Spirit

As we have seen that the early Hindu religion could see the male-female principles in god as equal and important, so too is the case when we make a search into the early Christian Church. Holy Spirit, the third person of the Christian Trinity was known in early Syriac theology as Mother. Their doxological formula was: The Father, the Son and the Mother. It is true that many of us would not rather shudder at the

12. Z. Werblowsky, *The Encyclopaedia of the Jewish Religion*, p. 404.

thought of saying, 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Mother' instead, of the traditional 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' Pious sentiments and feelings however strong; blind practices and subconscious response, however deeprooted; it can be conclusively shown that the Holy Spirit, in fact, is the Divine Mother, the female principle in the Trinity.

The word *RUHA* in Semitic language is feminine while its Latin equivalent 'spiritus' is masculine and '*puema*' in Greek is neuter. Accordingly, the Holy Spirit in ancient syriac writings is always feminine. Thus the oldest syriac version of the Bible, dating back to 200 A.D. explicitly calls the Holy Spirit "she." For example, John 14:26 reads: "The Spirit, the paraclete, she shall teach you everything." But *Peshita*, the fifth century authentic syriac version, has changed 'she' or 'it' into 'He.'¹³ However, truth, self-resplendent and vindicated by its own testimony defies all human caprice and contrivance.

St. Ephrem, the leading luminary of the Syriac Church says:

It is not said of Eve that she was Adam's sister or his daughter, but that she came from him, likewise, it is not to be said that the Spirit is a daughter or sister but that she is from God and con-substantial with Him.¹⁴

Fulton J. Sheen has almost explicitly, though in a different context, asserted the need of a mother in the Godhead. "Can religion," he asks "do without motherhood"? It certainly does not do without Fatherhood. But since motherhood is as necessary as fatherhood in the natural order, shall the devoted religious heart be without a woman to love"?

Conclusion

Going back to Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." God created humans male and female. How could man be made of in the image and likeness of God, male and female, unless there is a male-female principle in God? We shall see that the nature of man's present mode of existence as male and female is a participated one as it comes from God. Again, it is wrong to consider the male-female complementarity as something evil or a limitation. As the degree of levels

13. Journal of Dharma, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 162.

14. Quoted in Journal of Dharma, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

of being increases, we find that this male-female polarization becomes more and more wider and stronger. It is why we can neither find a male stone nor a female stone nor a male blackboard and a female blackboard. We may notice this gradation through plants and animals to man. As complexity increases consciousness also increases; and as the level of consciousness increases the ability to bring both elements together also increases. From man, as Teilhard de Chardin sees, there is a tendency to converge into the Omega point where the individuality and personality of each man would be safeguarded.

The male-female polarity found in nature is something good and admirable. It is God who creates everything including human species as male and female. It is a perfection in that sense, and perfection found in contingent beings should exist in their fulness in God. Thus we may conclude that there is nothing wrong in considering male-female principle in God. In God, as C.G. Jung sees, opposites, such as male and female, good and evil are united. For Jung, there is a Quaternity in the place of Trinity where the fourth person is the Divinized Mary, the Mother of God, a female person.

God is ever a mystery to the religious mind. None of the enriching and ennobling human realities can be found wanting in God. Many of the recognized feminine qualities have a great appeal for the religiously nurtured God-seeker. Hence it is quite natural for a religious man to see some feminine aspects in his God. The evil found in the created beings should be denied of God. The dominance of one over the other is injustice and evil as both are created in the same degree of perfection, and are in the same sphere of being. Both man and woman reflect the image and likeness of God. Therefore it is time to herald the death of God as the death of the great patriarch and of a phallocratic value system, and to develop a new conception of God as the Supreme Being, in whom both male and female principles happily blend together. Man and woman together must work for the liberation of the oppressed and the oppressors. They together must work for the establishment of a sane and more flexible distribution of their roles. The dominance of man can be undone and freedom of woman can be achieved in the society only when man and woman contribute their joint experiences and show themselves capable of learning, changing and redefining their roles. Such a new definition of gender justice is a condition for human integration of sexuality into individual, social and religious levels and we have to go a long way for the realization of that goal.