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**THE LONELY GODDESS:
THE LACK OF BENEVOLENT FEMALE
RELATIONSHIPS IN HINDU AND
SHI'ITE MYTHOLOGY.**

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A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the award of
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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Date: 27 MARCH 2003

ABSTRACT

This minor dissertation engages a theoretical feminist discourse to identify the lack of benevolent female relationships in the development of religious mythology. The study explores two diverse belief systems, Hinduism and Shi'ism, in order to demonstrate that the feminine is reduced to a subservient and controlled creative force across different religious and cultural systems. The study further develops the roles of the woman in the religious tradition, as mother and nurse to the hero and the guardian of male symbols and language. I have drawn on the feminist critical analysis of Luce Irigaray, and on classical Hindu and Shi'ite myth, to discern ways in which the female has been alienated from patriarchal social reality, due to the male-defined construction of the sacred, divine and submissive woman.

After the introduction in Chapter One, Chapter Two looks at the Hindu mythological construction of the single, female creative force of *shakti*, and her submission to the brotherhood of the *trimurti*. In Chapters Three and Four, I turn to the androcentric interpretation of the goddesses, Parvati and Sita, looking at the various forms taken by the goddesses and their subservience to the male-dominated social reality. I also show how their self-determinist motivations, as expressed in the characters of Kali and Dhumavati, render this social reality, chaotic. I then turn to Chapter Five to reveal the reality of the social parameters that inhibit the development of the contemporary Hindu female in myth and reality.

In Chapter Six, I look firstly at the development of the sacred feminine in Shi'ite myth as well as the creation aspect of that religious tradition, which is the sole preserve of the masculine, in the form of Imams, who are representative of God on earth. Secondly, I draw on feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, to postulate the elaboration of the single, divine female in terms of male determinism of creation.

In Chapter Seven there is an investigation into the concept of the *Athena*, and her contribution to the peripheral, socio-political development of the female in Shi'ite myth, as well as how a single, divine woman is created and venerated at the expense of other female characters, in a male-constructed tradition that forces these women to embody

malevolent characteristics. This chapter also investigates mothers and daughters who do not establish a nurturing, benevolent relationship nor a sisterhood of communication. In revealing the reality of the Shi'ite tradition, Chapter Eight elaborates on the interpretation of the contemporary Shi'ite female in myth and social reality.

This line of analysis supports the notion that the divine feminine exists in isolation from other females, and particularly from benevolent female interaction and communication. As such, mortal women are encouraged to imitate these characteristics of the divine, although always informed of their inability to actually be the divine feminine. In challenging these perceptions of the feminine, I have suggested the need for a reconstruction of these available mythic characters, or simply for the creation of new characters, male and female, that would present women with new symbols and their own language, providing them with a voice and a sense of purpose, other than that of mother, nurse and guardian.

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THE LONELY GODDESS:

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Although research has been undertaken in determining the lack of female relationships within belief systems in respect to mythology and the social environment, there remains a shortfall within much of the literature. There is a profound lack of noting the isolation of female deities and heroines and the absence of personal interaction among them. Feminist scholars have reported on the female figure's inferior position and the subjected role she adheres to in relation to the male, but they fail to mention the lack of benevolent female relationships or that women are the psychological backbone for the socio-political development of men's endeavours. This paper aims to emphasise the lack of benevolent female relationships within the construction of belief systems and the solitary position of female characters within religious myths. Using an argument established by French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, I intend to expand her argument to incorporate all female-to-female relationships. Much of Irigaray's research lies within Greek mythology and Christian tradition and others such as Murad and Nafisi have attempted to utilise her argument within Islam. Incorporating all the above-mentioned angles I aim to transfer Irigaray's argument, as well as scholars that have utilised her analysis, to Hindu and Shi'ite mythology and society.

The direction taken by Irigaray (1980a-1985b) and Keller (1997) is the realisation that there is a lack of mother-daughter relationships portrayed in historical mythology and religion. For Irigaray, this relationship was sacrificed so that the male-dominated environment remained central to the socio-political arena. Incorporating this philosophy and extending it beyond the mother-daughter relationship I will emphasise the alienation of females and the antagonistic relations between women that establishes male domains in opposition to the integrity of the female characters in Hindu and Shi'ite myth. Male-constructed society and culture promotes alienation, physical isolation and subjection of the feminine as suitable female development, armed with religious literature that interprets these practices as an ideal. There is a subtle admiration for the women in sacred texts, such as Fatima, Sita and Parvati, who never establish benevolent social relationships with other females, preferring to serve and protect their male relatives.

Similarly, sacred literature establishes the importance of language in elaborating on the subjection and seduction of women into a false sense of being protected and venerated. Some women in religious myth even undertake the foundational characteristics of the masculine by providing men with the opportunity to develop their power and aiding in oppressing and degrading younger women. These *Athenas*¹ unconsciously sustain the androcentric environment by creating a cycle of subservient free labour, without the reciprocity of love or gratitude. My research and concluding remarks propose that men are the architects of this language; that women sacrifice their humanity, in terms of relationships with other women, to maintain the socio-political order.

Female character development in religious myth is limited to promoting and sacrificing; that is, promoting male identity, character and social reality and sacrificing feminine personality and soul to the male environment. The female is committed to fulfilling a prescribed role of domesticity and maternity, an argument consistently articulated by Irigaray (Irigaray, 1980a; 1984a,b; 1985a,b; 1986; 1991; 1993; Whitford, 1991a,b). In these roles women are isolated from the male-controlled environment; they are vulnerable, dependent and isolated, existing on the generosity and intentions of male relatives. This male-dominated environment constructs a private area where men are able to amuse themselves at the expense of their dependents. This area also provides the rudimentary basis for men's ego-development through the female serving as mother, lover, sister and child. All her social forms are subservient to his needs and desires.

The male establishes foundations of power over female relatives by forcing them to sacrifice their happiness and ambitions. For men, this form of male character development, civilization and social structure is the norm; for women, the fulfillment of this sacrificial role defines them. Women thus contribute indirectly to the success of the androcentric civilization. A more direct contribution by women is construed as chaotic and evil (Allen, 1998; Cooley, 1997; Murad, 1999; O'Flaherty, 1980; Hirst, 1998; Bennett, 1983a), a feminine intrusion into the patriarchal structure that orders society and dictates gender positions that are subservient to the religio-political elite (Shariati, 1980; Iwai, 1985; Bennett, 1983b).

¹ *Athenas* are women who attempt to subvert the intentions of women who do not comply with the norms of the male-dominated society.

Hinduism and Shi'ism will be the focus of this study in order to show the different historical and interpretive aspects of these belief systems. Hinduism lacks the linear historical development of monotheist religions, whereas Shi'ism demands rationale and supports a linear historical approach to validate divine events. The myths in both religious systems demonstrate an ideal woman sought by patriarchal clan structures, as noted by Noddings (1989), Anderson (1998), Babb (1970) and Mincec (1982).

Religion parallels the socio-political structure in casting women as mothers, wives and sisters. Subservience to male decision-making determines whether they continue to play a role within the society. Traditionalist scholars of religion and theology assume that women perish emotionally, and often physically, with the death of their male relation leaving their lives without purpose and meaning. Such praxis has developed from Hindu mythology where female self-sacrifice, even self-immolation, is venerated. Her role complete and her services (and being) contractually annulled, the woman now ceases to be of interest to the male environment, a sentiment that is echoed in Irigaray's interpretation that establishes the feminine as an economic entity (Sharp, 2002; Mincec, 1982; Whitford, 1991a, 1991b).

Certain feminist authors such as Rachnavard (1987) and al-Faruqi (1999) engage a traditional discourse of the venerated feminine that possesses little commonality with mortal women. Other scholars offer an intense critique of these ideal positions. The iconic woman lacks identical male veneration; men receive veneration for their humanity and character whereas women are praised for being abnormal. These women do not menstruate, have painless births (mostly sons) and remain virgins (Ordoni, 1987; Murad, 1999; Stowasser, 1998; Erndl, 1993; Keller, 1997), hence detaching them from the anatomy of real woman.

Noddings (1989), O'Flaherty (1980), Nafizi (1997) and Shaaban (1995) introduce an aspect of the evil feminine that demands control and subjection to male authority. The feminine, as projected within mythology, often portrays asexuality and yet is a producer of sons. This symbol is problematic for the barren woman, whereby it is socially construed as her responsibility to determine the sex of progeny, as a Vedic text illustrates: "the birth of a girl, grant it elsewhere, here grant a son" (Erndl, 1993:113).

Apart from Irigaray emphasising the lack of mother-daughter interaction, much of the literature fails to report the isolation of the female in her environment that appears in religious myth. Females appear to lack any relationships other than with husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. In *Marine Lover* (1991), Irigaray argues that women continually serve as nurses, regardless of their relationship with the male. Throughout his life a man possesses several nurses who do not interact with one another, but instead compete for his attention. Females enter into dialogue solely to cement his position and authority in the social environment. This poses an interesting point when reviewing the Shi'ite literature, as Iwai (1985), Mutahari (2001), Najmabadi (1998) and Nafizi (1997) reflect that although Shi'ite Islam recognised the psychological strength of women to pursue self-determination, it had to be within the context of the male environment. When the social environment threatens male interests, women are then permitted to intervene and demonstrate their strength on their behalf.

In the context of Hindu myth females who possess power and knowledge are portrayed as uncontrollable (Kinsley, 1997; O'Flaherty, 1980; Gold, 1994; Ranade, 1983; Noddings, 1989), suggesting that those who are independent of male control threaten the social order. Often what is not further investigated is the fear of strong independent females within benevolent female relationships; that it is indeed chaotic and dangerous to the male establishment, to its controlled reality and to the *Athenas*² (Korte, 1994; Mutahari, 2001; Leslie, 1989; Whitford, 1991a; Whitford, 1991b). These women could undermine the authority of patriarchs by encouraging female participation in the socio-political environment. In a modern context, certain female authors such as Al-Faruqi (2002) and Rachnavard (1987) still favour the traditional male-prescribed social position for women. Their veneration of women is defined by motherhood and self-sacrifice, as if women could never pursue other directions. For such authors women are role-defined and not agents of self-determination.

Authors Kinsley (1985), Ordoni (1987) and Bilgrami (1986) relate the cultural and social dimensions that stereotype women within literature. These authors interpret the

² *Athenas* are the females who oversee that the authority of the male establishment is maintained through the dominance over and subjection of younger women.

mythology by illustrating the negative opinions of women that can be attributed to male fears and desires. The desire exists for eternally youthful, non-menstruating virgins, not for the loathsome old, poor and weak woman who no longer serves her male partner/master - an image relayed by some religious interpreters, particularly Jayaram (2000), Qummi (2001), Fadlullah (2000) and Tabataba'i (1989). For example, the Shi'ite heroine, Fatima, remains an androcentric ideal of the feminine, one of female submissiveness that maintains society. The strong female characters may only exist and engage for the benefit of the male-defined environment. For the greater part al-Faruqi (2001), Fadlullah (2000), Qummi (2001) and Ayati (2001) regard the female as invisible, subservient to her environment and male relatives, and responsive only to their needs. Outspoken women, as Cooley (1997), Mincec (1982), Najmabadi (1998) and Keddie (2000) demonstrate, are portrayed as ominous, malevolent beings who threaten the assumption that men's psychological development makes them superior to women.

Within Hindu literature, such feminine complexities occur in the character of Sita, for example; she occupies extreme positions as the eternally subservient, suffering woman who finally rejects her husband and his socio-political environment (Hess, 1999; Hirst, 1998; Choudhury, 1998; Gold, 1994).

Mircea Eliade demonstrates that the male environment refuses to tolerate female development and to incorporate women in constructing civilization (Allen, 1998; Eliade, 1991; Waardenburg, 1980; Reynolds and Capps, 1976). Women act as a subsidiary to male ideology and Eliade effectively demonstrates that myth and symbols cannot effectively transcend time so that this ideal would continue to make sense. Instead, an anachronism exists in interpreting places, symbols and mythology in a contemporary context where interpreters persist with reinforcing symbolic constructs that demand a subservient female position within progressive societies.

Although the essence of Hindu mythology differs starkly from Shi'ism, the personification and symbolisation of the feminine is similar. In constructing a feminine principle in Hindu myths of origin, Kinsley (1985, 1986, 1997), Marglin (1985) and O'Flaherty (1980a, 1980b) illustrate that the destructive force of universal development is given over to the unfavourable aspects of the feminine. Widowhood, hunger, economic

destitution are the result of female intervention; yet these events reflect male inability to predict it.

Interpretive literature in both Hindu and Shi'ite traditions demonstrates how best the ideal woman fulfills her role, rather than allowing her to relate her own character. Fatima and Sita are venerated for their tolerance for suffering domestic and social abuses; they suffered as dutiful wives and daughters, subservient and obedient to their male relatives.

Women have achieved great status in religion but their roles remain problematic. Isolated from other females, they are judged according to role performance rather than character analysis and social achievement. One such example is of Fatima, who is said to have written a book that is lengthier than the Qur'an (al-Quazwini and Saleh, 2001; Shariati, 1980; Shaaban, 1995; Rachnavard, 1987), yet this is rarely acknowledged. Instead, her 'role' is her contribution to men, not her literary and intellectual skills. The woman who straddles gender occupations, capable of contributing in both male and female environments, lacks recognition, due to socio-religious prejudice. Certain authors insist that women must assert and demonstrate their capabilities; yet if they are not recognised, respected and revealed, then what purpose will this serve?

It is perhaps a situation of male colonisation where the female is bonded to slavery by contributing labour and support. She resigns freedom to benefit her protectors who abuse, degrade and ignore her intellect and contributions. Foucault maintained that women must be viewed as equal to men in order for society to progress through the emotional and psychological growth of both sexes (Foucault, 1988: 72-176). Similar sentiments are presented by Shariati (1980), Keddie (2000) and Najmabadi (1998), who interpret religious mythology from another social perspective, liberating the role-defined female within the religious establishment and incorporating her as an active contributor to the social environment. Nafisi (1997) and al Quazwini and Saleh (2001) insist that the male-dominated environment does not understand the feminine and instead wants to own, destroy the feminine subject. Defence of such strategy demonizes women, as their capacity to deceive and undermine is believed to be greatest in the sexual sphere.

Seeking to maintain sole access to power, authority and decision-making women are reduced to dim, deceitful and distrustful objects. By denying the female any form of power or independence the male-dominated environment is fearfully suspicious of the

gender that it undermines and so eliminates female relationships. Young and Wiedermann (1987a,b) and Mitter (1991) relate that females constantly need to manipulate and seduce the males within their social environment in order to gain indirect access to power structures. Hindu and Shi'ite female social orientation is instructed in the *Laws of Manu* (Buhler, 1964) and the Qur'an, where female personification and character are determined as an extension of the legal codes of conduct.

Hindu commentators such as Tryambakayajvan³ (Leslie, 1989; Ranade, 1983; Rajan, 1993) maintain the misogynist guise that women serve no other purpose than to entertain men. He elaborated that suicide offers a widow great rewards if she maintained her subservience to her deceased husband; such sentiment supports self-immolation as the pinnacle of wifely devotion. These interpretations of sacred history and social reality have isolated women by restricting their opportunity to develop character. Prevented from constructing a lineage through their daughters and female relatives, androcentric social constructs thrive by eliminating older women and curbing the development of such female relationships.

Tryambakayajvan stated that "when sati is performed by a woman who throughout her lifetime has done wrong - that is, what her husband did not like - then it is said to have the quality of a sufficient atonement" (Leslie, 1991:186). Self-immolation eliminates inauspicious widowhood; rather than living without her husband and raising her children as a celibate ascetic, a woman may opt to self-immolate. Leslie describes the path of the female as the feminine that never matures. She must be married before becoming a woman and then reduced to serving and obeying her husband throughout his earthly life; the woman who disobeys him once will burn in the oil of hell (Leslie, 1991:189). She is prevented from developing female relations and although she no longer has a duty to perform for her husband, she may not resort to engaging female relatives as companions.

In such symbolic constructions of the female, it is only in death that she is worshipped as a *devi* (goddess), bringing salvation to her male relatives, regardless of their lifestyles. Deification of the dead female serves as a prominent Hindu icon and

³ An eighteenth century orthodox pandit who attempted to summarise the views of Hindu religious laws, in classical Sanskrit texts, relating to women (Leslie, 1991:183).

impossible figure for mortal women to mimic. Even in death the woman cannot develop female relationships; instead, she is restricted to serving her husband and male relatives.

1.2 METHOD AND THEORY

The theory put forward by Irigaray (1980a-1993) is that the female remains unrepresented in androcentric language and patriarchal domains of existence. The female continues as an object of the masculine socio-political environment aided by patriarchal pyramid structures. The *Athenas* and the subjected female maintain and support patriarchy, defined through control and manipulation. The male domain is instituted, maintained and directed through language and its use of symbols constructs a particular history of heroes. The aim of this dissertation is to explore the manner in which the male constructs the socio-political environment by subjecting women and the feminine. It will be argued that the use of religious ideology and social control has reinforced a dislocation in female relationships and the isolated role that women play within that environment.

Patriarchal language silenced the woman, misinterpreted her actions, insisting that they were committed in madness and out of character and that her language cannot be articulated or understood (Irigaray, 1980a-1986; Whitford, 1991a). As she is muted, she gesticulates, desperate to explain her situation and her feelings, but the interpreter assumes that she is mad because her movements are dramatic and appear violent. The woman is always out of control, she cannot control her blood, meat and mucus (menstruation, birth placenta, vaginal discharge) and needs constant supervision and restraint. To define herself there is need for a new language and a creation of new symbols, as articulated by Mircea Eliade (1991), Allen (1998) and Waardenburg (1980). The isolation of women in an alienated environment needs new symbols that define the female in a strong, independent position. This direction would refocus the heroine, redirecting the object into a subject.

In overcoming the notion of the male-defined object, the female can transcend it by creating a language and symbols that provide greater elaboration and definition of the female. The mother-daughter relationship, in symbolic representations of the divine, is located in a horizontal trinity of mother, daughter and grandson, and not vertically, as is male genealogy. Often this female trinity (mother, daughter, grandson) is located at the

base of male relationship with the divine, and family history is represented as consistent with the birth of a son and realisation of divine intervention.

It can be inferred that the horizontal feminine trinity defines terrestrial movement, which is restricted from vertical movement, in terms of both social hierarchy and celestial, divine connection. The divine intervention reduces females to a reproductive purpose but still separates them from divine genealogy. Although woman is venerated as mother, there is a distinct lack of divine mother-daughter imagery; where it exists, a male intervenes and prevents their relationship. For Sharp, the daughter is ignored; she is not desired for herself but rather for her purpose of political connection and conception. There is no self-worth or desire for women as individuals (Sharp, 2002:74; Keller, 1997:71-72). Divinity that incorporates women with a greater emphasis than simply as mothers, daughters and subjected wives is vital to the development of an identity for women. Scholars have problematised this situation by insisting that women are represented, foremost, as mothers, whereas men are not seen, foremost, as fathers (Sharp, 2002:75; Keller, 1997:76; Korte, 1994:73-74).

In this dissertation, the above issues will be analysed in the context of Hindu and Shi'ite religious myth. Chapters Two to Five address particular points in Hindu tradition, while chapters Six to Eight deal with the Shi'ite tradition. Chapter Nine presents my concluding comments.

In Chapter Two, I aim to show that the female in Hindu tradition is the subordinate and controlled part of creation, where myth presents the image of the once powerful female who is stripped of her authority because of her emotion and sexual need. In the process of seeking a companion, the male clandestinely undermines and subjects her through certain promises and thus usurps power. Using Irigaray's notion of the sacrifice of feminine power (1980a) I will attempt to demonstrate the surrender of female power due to the perceived female need for love and companionship. Her usurped power is defended as threatening and in need of supervision and permanent control; failure to subvert female creativity results in chaos and eventual destruction of the universe.

Chapter Three offers an elaboration on the Hindu deity Parvati and her forms, namely, Sati, Kali and Dhumavati. These forms are multi-faceted in that they reflect a mythological perfection as well as a social reality for women that are both degrading and

fatal. Sati presents a twofold image, although Dalrymple (1999c), Flood (1998) and Kamat (2001) have noticed that her self-immolation is interpreted as defending Shiva's honour. However, the self-immolation can also be interpreted as the female sacrificed for the maintenance of patriarchal society, a notion asserted by Irigaray (1980a). Parvati is the only deity that I have selected to study that has a relationship with her mother, Mena. Her mother discourages her from performing prayers that would allow Parvati to realise marriage to Shiva, understood as the purpose of her reincarnation. It is noted that goddesses with strong personalities, deities such as Kali and Dhumavati, are figuratively interpreted by certain scholars, whereas Sati's and Parvati's actions are interpreted literally. Each manifestation reveals a different personality and social reality and each has a personal relationship with Shiva. Kinsley (1997) and Coburn (1991) show that Kali and Dhumavati are not subjected to Shiva and are considered inauspicious characters who often model the social reality for women.

Chapter Four depicts two interpretations of the epic heroine, Sita. Firstly, I undertook to present Sita metaphorically as a representation of land. It can be seen that her behaviour corresponded to that of the farmer and his agricultural land, and should not be interpreted as suitable behaviour for a mortal to imitate. Kinsley (1985) recognises the agricultural concept that linked Sita to the soil but I intend to elaborate on this persona that allowed her to establish ties with her maternal family and particularly indicates that the soil can be viewed as her mother.

The second interpretation of Sita is as the ideal woman in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. She appears as the long-suffering, unappreciated woman who sacrificed everything, even her life, but her husband could not appreciate these actions. I believe that this persona of Sita is a greater reflection of Rama and his personal character, than of Sita herself. Far from being the ideal heroic male who embraces male ideals of masculinity, Rama displayed his selfishness, arrogance and his insecurity. Hess (1999), Mitter (1991) and Shulman (1991) reflect on the use of language and speech that changes the position of Sita from a weak, subservient woman to a strong and patient one.

Chapter Five draws the projected imagery of the deities and the epic heroine and the social reality of women, together. I argue that social reality mimics mythology and also that the changing socio-economic domain influences the interpretation of symbols.

Women are rediscovering symbols and reinterpreting them in order to change their position at home and within their families. Acknowledging or creating benevolent female relationships within mythology would create them in reality, and the mother-daughter relationship is of primary significance to this development. In particular, the notion of the older woman can be changed from that of an abhorrent figure in male-dominated reality, to that of a powerful, benevolent instructor to younger women.

In Chapter Six, I develop representation and creation of the female position in Shi'ite myth. Again, I draw on Irigaray's imagery of the subjected female who is nurse to the dominant and divine male (1991). Here, divine creation and direction is the preserve of the male; the female fulfills a supportive and reproductive role. The concept of the *Athena* is expanded, where the first female portrayed in the mythology restricts the movement and ambitions of other females. In this manner, the society is maintained as a male-dominated domain where all females are subservient and self-sacrificing. From the divine aspect of creation, the masculine is accorded respect by removing the female from the creative process, so that the androcentric creator is established. Sustenance from his nurses is all that the male requires; the women surround and entertain him constantly (Irigaray, 1991:183). All women, Irigaray insists, symbolise the nurse, in the male paradigm, who constantly reassures the male's masculinity.

Chapter Seven looks at the creation of the perfect female within the development of Shi'ite mythology. The male yearns for the female, but he desires one that is celestially perfect. In so doing, he rejects the mortal woman as the true companion. No mortal woman can imitate this celestial female, but it is women's duty to adhere to her motherly devotion and self-sacrifice. This celestial mother differs from the mortal mother as she lives eternally in the male psyche; he considers her the only true mother. Mortal mothers, instead, give blood and milk that change to hymns and songs of glory to their males. These mothers begin to thirst for this glory, rather than love, redefining themselves in a mythology that relegates them to role performers. The mothers who reproduced male life are awarded death; death to their lives, motivations and love (Irigaray, 1991:140-142; Sharp, 2002:71-72; Bennett, 1983a: 220).

The patriarchal environment acknowledges that a mother-daughter relationship exists but the mother is not benevolent towards the daughter. Throughout their lives, the

mothers ignore their daughters, sacrificing female relations and sisterhood to serve the male subjects. By ignoring the need for female relationship, the woman acknowledges that she is disposable and nothing in the social reality. Ayati (2001), at-Tabarsi (1986) and Mutahhari (2001) demonstrate a reality in which the feminine must defend the male. Fatima becomes an *Athena*; although a strong female she wishes to curtail the socio-political development of her daughter, Zeinab. Regardless of the fact that she provided the foundation for the belief system, she rejects other females from establishing similar ambitions. She wants her daughter silent and invisible. Instead, Zeinab must promote Husayn and his ideology and she must sacrifice her happiness and her children to realise her divine family's dream.

Chapter Eight ties the mythology to the social reality of Shi'ite women. Here, Keddie (2000), Mincec (1982) and Murad (1999) have shown that the woman is bound within social reality to the mythological characters of Fatima and Zeinab. However they can never realise such symbolic ideals, for Fatima is perfection and women are not. The woman is inherently evil, she is bonded, denied access to the public domain and to understanding and interpreting the myth's symbols. Instead, men decide how the female is to be understood. An ambiguous environment exists in which women are given an androcentric role model of perfection in Fatima, and yet they must realise their imperfection and inferiority in the patriarchal environment where they are regarded with suspicion and disdain. Keddie and Shariati remark that Shi'ite women remain confused as to how to balance mimicking the public and outspoken figure of Fatima, yet maintaining a silent, subservient and often abusive motherhood that should reproduce sons.

This study expands on the two belief systems that differ vastly in divine orientation yet both undermine and prevent the female from establishing benevolent attachment to their mothers, sisters and friends. Hindu and Shi'ite mythology reduce the woman to an object and both refuse to acknowledge female attachments and relationships within their social realities. In Hindu and Shi'ite myth women maintain the belief system and culture but are restricted from actively contributing or being recognised as brave heroines. Instead, they are moulded to the patriarchal expectations sustaining anonymity within the male-dominated environment. I therefore embark on expanding the social reality and

mythological aspects of female sacrifice. Using Sharp (2002), Bennett (1983a-b), Keddie (2000) and Iwai (1985) I have projected Irigaray's notion of women as nurses, women who care for the male as a mother but who only occupy the role as wife, sister or lover. Irigaray claims that such a relationship disconnects the male and the female; the true relationship is between the male and his mother and not his wife (Irigaray, 1986).

It is noted that the male entrances the nurses, who celebrate his actions regardless of how that celebration undermines and reduces them. They celebrate his existence although they never shed their reserve. They remain warm towards him, yet cold towards and alienated from each other (Irigaray, 1991:124; Irigaray, 1986:170-172; Cooley, 1997:140-142). Consequently, the male, detached from the caring womb of childhood, seeks in adulthood a battery of self-sacrificing mothers who are lovers, wives, followers and servants. Women would kill for him or even kill themselves. They degrade the godliest of women for fear that they might encroach on his perfection and they would commit cruel acts in devotion to his selfishness and madness (Irigaray, 1991:126-128; Birge, 1999:25-30).

Irigaray noted the over-emphasis on the mother-son relationship, especially in religious myth, that hinders the psychological development of girls. Neglecting the mother-daughter relationship limits the girl's ability to create her own identity and sexuality (Sharp, 2002:70; Birge, 1999:25-27; Irigaray, 1985b:107-109). The girl struggles to find a suitable role-model and a psychological and emotional attachment. Her mother and sisters are distant, realising that eventually their fates are resigned to serving their husbands and sons. Even the sister relationships are strained due to the physical separation of marriage and the subservience demanded from mothers-in-law. There is a need for girls to experience a centralised respected position. Rather than simply being a mother and wife, women could occupy positions that allow them to communicate with other women and so offer support and direction. A visible woman shares her strength, motivating others to mimic and learn from her experiences, further emphasising the need for a sisterhood and empathy. Females need to be protagonists within their social milieu, proudly defining female genealogy.

The female role within Hindu and Shi'ite mythology is important in the development of the religio-political structure and the dissemination of knowledge to the

general population. Men are determined as contributive and reconstructive in their social environment, but females mainly serve and support, although hindered by passion and insanity. The mythology defines social reality and its ideals and the expectations of the gender roles, although pursuit of the ideal is expected most from the object (female) than from the subject (male).

It can be argued that the position of the isolated female in religious mythology exists because there were few female literary scholars whose contributions were considered noteworthy by the establishment. Of the handful of female scholars and interpreters embraced by religious authorities, most too, demonstrated similarly misogynist values as those of their male counterparts, thereby sanctioning established norms. An ideology that defined the masculine as the sole creator and determiner of the universe was incorporated into the elite groups to establish social and religious norms. As such literary discrimination continues to marginalize women, they are prevented from establishing bonds with other females. There is great religious emphasis on sisterhood being an evil and that women should not entertain such notions, yet some female scholars do not question such restrictions. Men have dominated the privileged position of being literate and visible, they have refused to share symbols with females, claiming them as part of their own personal character. These symbols aid in describing the social environment and the object status of the female, establishing a social milieu where all men are brothers but women are certainly not all sisters.

CHAPTER TWO: MALE CREATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRIMURTI

2.1 CONTROLLING AND DIRECTING SHAKTI

In the Hindu tradition and the androcentric nature of cosmogenic myth, *shakti* can be interpreted as two entities, one as the creative force that precedes all creation and two, the mother of all goddesses that manifests as the consorts of the male deities Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. I have chosen the first interpretation that of the creative force represented as female but always subservient to the gods that control her. There is no distinction between *shakti* and the possessor of *shakti*; it is always the male that dominates the female and *shakti* is never the possessor of her consort (Pintchman, 1994:147).

I (Brahma) alone am the destroyer, creator and maintainer of creation.
I am the possessor of *maya*. *Maya* which deludes the world, is my power (*shakti*). (Kurma Purana 2.4.18-19; see Pintchman, 1994:135)

According to the creation myth narrated in the Hindu sacred text, the *Devi Mahatmya*, *shakti* is the primordial female deity, who created the universe and the cosmos. She created three male deities, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (the Trimurti), due to her loneliness and asks each of them to marry her. She destroys Brahma and Vishnu, as they rejected her, but Shiva agrees to marriage; he then acquires her skills and murders her. She murders the male love interest because he is not concerned with her interests and aims but those of his own male-centred ambitions (Kinsley, 1997:65-70; Ranade, 1983:98-103; Prime, 1992: 36-38). It is a demonstration of the Oedipal case where Shiva possesses *shakti* as mother and wife and later slays her. As such he establishes a male-controlled creation where he directs *shakti* and subordinates the female.

Although *shakti* created the universe it can be argued that she possessed no direction and lacked a sense of order. Shiva asks the Great Mother to remove her jeweled crown and immediately she ages, but he remains young as he now controls time (Prime,

1992:38-39; Kinsley, 1997:120). It can be inferred that the female orchestrated her own demise and defined her subjected position. She removes the crown, and traditional interpretation does not suggest that Shiva is deceitful and distrustful, as would have been suggested had the power positions been reversed. The masculine did not force the feminine to rescind her power - instead, she volunteered. Shiva murders her - the mother that he married - in order to sever the subjected relationship he possessed with the Great Mother. He is able to demonstrate his masculinity that previously existed in the shadow and in fear of his mother. His suggestion that he will marry her when she returns as Sati reiterates male veneration of the mother and the androcentric ideal that women sacrifice their lives for the sake of the male-dominated environment.

Sati is symbolically represented as the subservient lonely woman, her life devoid of female relationships. Once the divine mother, she now yearns for the dominant male and acknowledges her subservience to him. As the quintessence of subservience and obedience she sacrifices her person to defend her husband's dignity. Shiva's control of the creative force has eliminated the self-determinist feminine creator, reducing her to a devoted servant. The female ultimate reality has been usurped and is now subjected to a male-dominated social order. When Shiva relegated his feared mother to that of his fearful wife, he was then able to control and direct *shakti* (Dhruvarajan, 1989:62-64; Kinsley, 1997:241-242). Through his self-established dominant position he demonstrated that *shakti* and the feminine must be controlled and subverted to prevent chaos. To maintain male control, the female is confined, receiving little knowledge and freedom that would allow her to re-institute her full power and destructive intentions. By creating the male the Great Mother conceded that she needed direction and order, that she was unable to construct these notions within herself.

In the *Shakta Puranas*, creation and development are attributed to control by male deities; the creation of the universe is attributed to Brahma, the maintenance to Vishnu and the destruction to Shiva. They direct the feminine *shakti* to promote positive development and creation. Without their control and direction the energy would be destructive, chaotic and counterproductive (Pintchman, 1994:178-180). This is most

evident with the *mahavidyas*,⁴ Dhumavati, for instance, possesses greater power and presence than Shiva (Sivananda, 2000c: <http://www.sivanandadlshq/>. ; Prime, 1992:40-41; Kinsley, 1997:121). When she swallows Shiva she becomes chaotic, but Shiva manipulates her to regurgitate him, at which point he curses her. His actions are seen as preserving and saving creation from female destruction.

In the *Matsya Purana*, Brahma created mankind, although these men lack the capacity to reproduce sexually. Brahma then engages in sexual relations with his mind-generated daughter, Satarupa, in what can be construed as an incestuous communion that conceives a son, Manu, thus redirecting the asexual means of production to sexual reproduction (Pintchman, 1994:141; Prime, 1992:50). Reproduction trapped humankind in the cycle of rebirth and death. O'Flaherty claims that death, originally represented as a stallion, then became a mare, adding emphasis to the feminine role in producing chaos and destruction (O' Flaherty, 1980:27).

"But although they had intercourse, women did not menstruate and so did not bear offspring" is part of the Vedic creation myth that depicts Brahma creating man and woman from himself thus regenerating them without the need for human reproduction (Sivananda, 2000a: http://www.sivanandadlshq.org. ; Prime, 1992:37). The reality seemed calm, ordered and eternal when the creator was solely male; when the female appeared, Brahma was enraptured and deaf to the protests of his male offspring. Satarupa initiated the cycle of birth and death, incorporating the polluting substance of blood that covered all when born. Through this blood the world is contaminated and chaotic and mankind strives to prevent rebirth brought about by the female.

Male deities are credited with the positive development and maintenance of creation. This order is maintained through the control and subjection of *shakti* which if left unabated would eventually destroy creation. Such cosmic and mythic symbolisations of male-female interaction are transferred to the social reality of men and women. Women are seen as imbued with *shakti* and best controlled through marriage. When surrendering her power through marriage a woman becomes benevolent and devoted

⁴ The *mahavidyas* are ten manifestations of Sati and are tantric in worship (as opposed to Vedic worship) and relate to the individual rather than instructional toward community and family. They are deemed inauspicious and dangerous (Kinsley, 1997:2-3).

solely to her husband. As a *pativrata* (devoted wife) she now exists only for the male, thus reneging on sisterhood and female relationships (Pintchman, 1994:208-209).

2.2 ANDROCENTRIC CONSTRUCTION AND INTERPRETATION OF HINDU THOUGHT

In patriarchal symbolic and social structures, the aging component establishes the finite position of the feminine. Hindu religio-political development of humanity is defined in terms of male dominance and creation (Irigaray, 1980b:12; Irigaray, 1985a:99; Rupal, 2001:1070-1073). Irigaray elaborates on the misogynist religious-kinship tradition as well as the lack of female interaction portrayed in mythology and enacted in society. Patriarchal society excludes women on the basis of psychological patterns that claimed to be determined by women's biology. Women therefore became subordinate to religious development and are sacrificed for the sake of male socio-spiritual progress. Hindu religious development degraded the female social position and confined women to the domestic sphere. Such misogynist progression has prevented women from actively altering symbolic representation of their position within mythology and also their position within their real communities.

In Hindu creation myth, Parasurama⁵ murdered his mother and thus established the first sacrifice, well illustrating Irigaray's notion of the original sacrifice in pre-religious systems and its significance for establishing patriarchy (Irigaray, 1984a:62-63). This act depicted the foundational role of the feminine in constructing a male-dominated society (Prime, 1992:38-40; Sivananda, 2000c: <http://www.sivanandadl/>). Parasurama wields an axe, symbolising a pre-political and pre-religious society where the social order, including the norm of the reproductive couple, had yet to be established. With the original sacrifice the mother-son relationship is defined rather than that of husband-wife, which Irigaray expounded as the generation gap between marriage partners (Irigaray, 1980a:2). Such sentiment is coupled with the religio-social laws that insist on marriage between very young girls and adult men. Hindu mythology does not emphasize love

⁵ Parasurama is one of the eight avatars of Lord Vishnu.

between the man and woman as an equal couple; instead, this emotive issue is emphasized with regard to the mother. This pattern reflects on the social establishment, in that the male constantly seeks to transfer his relationship with his *mother* to his wife. The social norm expects the male to venerate his mother, not his wife. Tension arises within the relationship as the man seeks his mother in his wife; his anxiety defines his spouse as inferior and imperfect (Irigaray, 1993:3; Minces, 1982:34-38).

After the demise of Parasurama, the religious and social environment is developed through morally astute characters who are primarily tied to the earth and nobility, such as Rama who will be explained in Chapter Four (Sivananda, 2000b: <http://www.sivanandadlshq.org>). These male characters define socio-political reality as well as the religious ideal for male-female relationships.

In comprehending the social paradigms of the Hindu socio-religious system, the Brahmanical patriarchal system of kinship and ethnic purity reduced the female to a silent, reproductive object. Defined along caste lines of purity and rebirth, she remained polluted, as part of biology, and ignorant in terms of religious and spiritual knowledge (Choudhury, 1998:89; Young, 1987:65-66; Flood, 1998: 34-37; Hazra, 1987:26-27). Although female deities existed in the myths, regardless of their personal strength they remained subservient to their male spouses. Where such gender roles were inverted, the goddess is considered inauspicious and her environment chaotic. The divine couple must be reflected in the earthly mortal couple and the religious establishment frowned upon dominant women. The male commentators controlled the worship of the feminine deity and therefore the development of the literal and allegorical interpretation of the actions of the divine (Young, 1987:67; Kinsley, 1997:80-81).

The Hindu pantheon possesses male and female deities but the goddess occupies a subservient position. As such, gender relationships are not based on equality and often the goddesses are emotionally distraught as a result of the selfish behaviour of the gods, but they remain faithful, focused on their marital duties. The behaviour of the deities can be construed as symbols of the emotions of humanity but also of the unequal relationships that exist between men and women. The symbolic representation of the goddess spans the spectrum of mental, emotional and spiritual development, but for the mortal Hindu female the social limitations and restrictions prevent her from realising and

adopting many of the strong independent attributes that threaten a male-controlled and dominated socio-political sphere. The androcentric construction of the divine prevents women from identifying with the figure of the goddess; a woman cannot achieve the subservient perfection of Sita nor can she identify with the strong, independent position of the *mahavidyas*. Either way, female deities are not natural mothers and where children appear (Ganesh, Karttikeya, Lava and Kusa) there is a distinct absence of female children. Since the goddesses' spiritual appeal lay in fertility often regarded as an important feature of their benevolence, Hindu women are pressured by their communities to seek divine assistance in this area.

The construction of Hindu mythology relays the importance of male and female deities in creation (Pintchman, 1994:174-175), in contrast to the Shi'ite construction that permits only male determinism in religious development. The male transcends the developments on earth and is concerned with creation, maintenance and destruction. Although powerful, the female is prevented from acting without male guidance, as symbolised in myths where the male deity produces and the female simply reproduces.

Although a myriad of deities exists in Hindu mythology, I have limited my theoretical research to two goddesses, namely Parvati and Sita. Parvati is the reincarnation of Sati who also possesses ten manifestations known as *mahavidyas*, although only two will be discussed, namely, Dhumavati and Kali. Unlike the male deities, female deities lack independent history and are essentially defined by male partners, apart from the *mahavidyas*, who appear to dominate Shiva. Goddesses lack benevolent relationships with other females such as their mothers, sisters and friends. They only sexually interact within marriage whereas their partners are entitled to philander. The strongest and most self-determined goddesses, *mahavidyas*, exist on the fringes of society, close to death and chaos (Kinsley, 1997:2; Coburn, 1986:155; Dalrymple, 1999a: 7-10). It is often perceived that these women are independent and uncontrolled but their particular environment should be noted. They exist on the margins of society, where the control of the male is limited and where there is scant regard for social design, implying that they co-opt symbols that define the male ideal of civilisation (Surgirharajah, 1998:68-70). Not necessarily independent, these goddesses reflect the

male-prescribed position of women when they are not part of a controlled environment and male authority.

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CHAPTER THREE: INTERPRETING THE FORMS OF THE GODDESS PARVATI

3.1 SATI

Sati is an auspicious character in Hindu mythology more so for her death than for her existence. She is venerated within Hindu social culture for her act of self-immolation defending her husband's honour. Although Sati and Sita both enter fires, their motivation and results differ starkly although both women are venerated within the male-dominated social reality. One can deduce that the patriarchal environment reveres women who endure extreme pain for male-constructed ideals. Sati represents an ideal female in popular culture and religion, sexual yet unpolluted through childbirth, she had no attachment to family, particularly female relatives. She maintained her youth through early death and she was the guardian of her husband's honour.⁶

The *Devi Mahatmya* describes Sati as the wife of Shiva, reincarnated as Parvati after sacrificing herself to save her husband's dignity from her father, Daksha's insult⁷. Her suicide severs her relationship with Shiva but she considers it her *stridharma* (women's duty) demonstrating the epitome of her husband's integrity. Sati's existence revolves around Shiva and she devotes her life to him. Popular sentiment places great emphasis on the reputation of the husband whose honour and superiority is guarded and defined by female behaviour and sacrifice (Kinsley, 1985:37-39; Dalrymple, 1999c:123-125; Dalrymple, 1999b: 50-52; Kamat, 2001: <http://www.kamat.com/sati>). Androcentric literature presents the heroine as devoutly observant of protecting male symbols that she does not and cannot possess, especially where symbols and their continuation define the

⁶ Although the codes in the Manu Laws are specific on the position of the female they do not request self-immolation and accept that women are to be widows.

⁷ Sati is insulted when she discovers that her father has not invited her husband or her to attend a ceremony. She is further incensed when she hears her father degrading Shiva, feeling humiliated and afraid to relate the story to Shiva who had forbidden her to see her parents. She decides to commit suicide by jumping into the sacred fire (<http://www.kamat.com>).

environment. Sati's burning body releases smoke, in the form of Dhumavati, a *mahavidya* who represents the depression and sadness that dwells within the hearts of women and yet are despised and rejected by the male environment. This emotive stance represented by Dhumavati is ignored in the context of the patriarchal reality, and Sati instead is venerated for her immolation and death rather than for her character.

It can be argued that when Shiva took Sati's body into the heavens, deserting the earth and endangering it (Kinsley, 1985:51-53; Coburn, 1991: 24-30), he was distracted by the female, with near chaotic consequences. I would further argue that her death symbolises the inability of women to dwell in the celestial realm where their contribution is portrayed as destructive and disruptive. To correct this near chaos Vishnu cuts Sati's corpse into fifty-one pieces that fall to earth. As such, women either dwell upon the earth, or below it initiating growth and sustenance for males to realise their *dharma*.

Sati's *yonis* (genitalia) falls to earth where it lures Shiva thus saving the earth from destruction. Shiva's *lingum* (phallus) enters Sati, representing the social prejudice that women entice men. The *yonis*'s shape illustrates a beckoning, a lure awaiting an attachment. The *lingum* does not need to be attached and can separate itself from the *yonis*; it does not require a partnership but is visibly apparent whereas the *yonis* is hidden and dark. It is the *yonis* that stimulates creation and participation and needs to be guided and protected by the masculine. If the *lingum* represents asceticism, aloof and spiritual by natural creation, the implication is that the *yonis* would be the opposite. The *yonis* cannot exist alone for it needs to be coupled and reproductive and is therefore not spiritual by nature. It is the *yonis* that is disruptive preventing the *lingum* from dwelling peacefully in the celestial universe of spirituality. Sati's triumph is said to be that she brought Shiva from asceticism into the creative and earthly realm thus negatively asserting the female as a distraction from the divine (Kinsley, 1985:40).

Sati returns Shiva to the cycle of creation and death, binding him to the earth eternally. Although she existed without female relationships, the male-dominated environment still considers the woman as polluting and subversive. For patriarchal reality Sati was more important dead than alive, as her sacrifice ultimately saved humankind. However, she is not credited with saving humanity and the earth, her

posthumous actions are perceived as the catalyst that brings Shiva to earth, so that he saves it.

3.2 INTERPRETING SELF-IMMOLATION (SATI)

There are two forms of self-immolation in Hindu mythology, namely, that of Sati in the *Devi Mahatmya*, and Sita, who will be analysed in Chapter Four, in the *Ramayana*. The social environment venerates both women for committing these acts, demonstrating their psychological strength and devotion. Although both women undertook to perform these acts, they did so under different conditions and expectations, although conclusively it was to save male honour and display female devotion. As such, the results for both women were different: Sati burned, severing her relationship with Shiva but Sita survived unscathed, saving her marriage to Rama. In social reality, the Hindu woman is worshipped as *Devi* if she burns her living body, and although the ritual act is rarely practised, this places enormous pressure on young widowed women with children to perform such tasks that are self-sacrificing in devotion to her dead husband. The position taken by Sati is promoted in the religious community as more realistic than that of Sita, which few women, regardless of their devotion and chastity, could replicate.

Sati and Sita's acts of self-immolation as reaction to a male insult are often downplayed in tone in the literature. Not only are the tone and derogatory remarks often removed when depicting male dialogue but the female speech always implies defensiveness and responsiveness rather than self-determination (Hess, 1999:6-7). By venerating this action the literature does not grant Sita and Sati children before their self-immolation and Sita refuses to perform a second self-immolation once she had attained motherhood.

In terms of determining the social purpose of self-immolation in the earthly paradigm one can only surmise that it is grounded in the male fear of female sexuality coupled with the notion that women are property. Once again I utilize the *yoni-lingum* concept where the *yoni* possesses sexual power existing purely for the *lingum's* use. Unlike the male *lingum* the female *yoni* needs to be filled, one is dependent upon the other and the female demonstrates a need for the male. As the *yoni* is accessible and vulnerable to other *linga* and cannot be protected and controlled by the chosen *lingum*,

then according to the dictates of the patriarchal environment it is best destroyed. As the female is responsible for preserving male integrity, her social duty is to prevent other men from possessing her. Such an act would be construed as an insult to the memory of the deceased male partner (Hess, 1999:7; Leslie, 1989:15-19; Mitter, 1991: 38-42). To maintain this honour, a widow burns her living body as the zenith of her servitude, subservience and purity. It is the ultimate sacrifice that property (that is, the wife) can render to the owner by relinquishing attachment to another male.⁸ A dependent and unsupervised female must guard herself to save her husband's reputation and family name, rather than her own dignity and person.

Self-immolation purifies the woman and her family and is therefore a noble act. She joins her husband as his faithful servant regardless of the fact that she deserts her children. The male-dominated society claims that this painful sacrifice strengthens the marriage relationship. Without the male, the female has no identity or protection and loses the status provided by him. Certain traditionalists such as Tryambakayajvan argue that becoming a Sati is an act of empowerment, although such sentiment is not echoed in the *Laws of Manu* (Flood, 1998:39; Hess, 1999:5; Leslie, 1989:102-107; Dalrymple, 1999c:132-133). The choices, however, are considerably bleak for a woman: an inauspicious, lonely widowhood or painful fiery death.

However, the *Devi Mahatmya* and the *Ramayana*, that both include acts of self-immolation, also include several points that are often ignored. Firstly, those who commit the act are childless. Secondly, a burning female demonstrates that as an object she is devoid of benevolent relationships and attachments. Thirdly, the act underpins male narcissism, indicating that property serves only one owner and never another. A widow,⁹ in disregarding this duty of immolation, can be construed as being reluctant to serve her husband in her next life and therefore as inauspicious, particularly if she is a youthful

⁸ Kingsley states that Sati committed suicide to preserve her husband's honour and not as a widow. Her act also grieved and enraged Shiva (Kingsley, 1985:40).

⁹ Self-immolation was only performed in certain areas particularly Bengal and Rajasthan, and is most likely linked to inheritance laws more so than with religious duties (www.kamat.com).

woman. By not fulfilling her *dharma* she threatens the patriarchal social environment and is regarded with suspicion.

3.3 PARVATI

It is the male gods who determine that Sati be reincarnated as Parvati, for the sole purpose of bearing Shiva's child. This son would defeat the demon Taraka, and in so doing, could save the world (Kinsley, 1985:41; Pintchman, 1994:134; <http://www.freeindia.org>). Yet Parvati is prevented from fulfilling this role as the gods disrupt their lovemaking, fearing the power of the child born to them. Shiva's semen falls into the River Ganges where Karttikeya is conceived. So although he is the son of Shiva, his mother is Parvati's sister, the goddess Ganga (River Ganges). The other male child, Ganesha, is formed from dirt and Parvati's sweat, and not of her womb. She provides the nourishment of milk and sweat but not the dark polluting interior of the womb. The womb provides the female complete control over the development and continued existence of the child in this dark, damp and living cocoon, which is indicative of the woman's bond with Nature. The womb could expel or maintain the fetus granting the female character absolute control over the legacy of a god, a situation which the other male deities could not allow. As an auspicious character, Parvati is defined through her purity and devotion to Shiva; she even rejects her mother's appeals against marrying Shiva and undoubtedly maintains a jealous relationship with her sister, due to birth of Karttikeya.

Parvati's role has ambivalent significance for female characterisation; Parvati leaves her domestic, earthly realm to pursue celestial ascetism but she cannot remain there as this is not accepted as the female environment (Kinsley, 1985:39; Smith, 1991:18; Irigaray, 1984a:60-62). Yet gods are entitled to intrude upon the private domestic realm of the female in that they deny Parvati the opportunity to conceive. The symbolic significance of this myth suggests that women are therefore denied the right to their own sphere. Although forced into the domestic realm, Parvati cannot control it. At best, she shares it with her husband and it is he who determines even this female environment. Parvati's restricted and alienated role of motherhood is limited to weaning one son and constructing another. Her position is elevated above the normative by removing her from

the polluting aspect of the birth process. Transcending the prescribed role of the subservient and domesticated female, she never surpasses Shiva in terms of authority and temperament. In the mythic representation of the domestic domain, Parvati constructs houses, perhaps subconsciously demonstrating her loneliness and absence of children. Shiva responds by displaying his power to destroy her work and desires (Kinsley, 1985:47; <http://www.freeindia.org>; Hirst, 1998:118-120).

It can be argued that the female symbolises the earth and that the male is an uncontrollable, universal and awe-inspiring power. The female concedes helplessly to this destruction, survives and rebuilds, but always in anticipation of another attack. Shiva's supremacy is expounded in that he does not concede to Parvati's plea for a house; he refuses to be tied to the mundane world, resisting commitment of himself to the cycle of life and death. This confirms that, regardless of the beauty and cunning guile of the female, she cannot subvert the spiritual intentions of the male. He is entitled to determine her path and to alienate her from her family, yet refuses to accommodate her intentions to create a family structure and identify with other females.

Using Irigaray's argument that a mother-daughter role is not established in traditional literature is supported here, since Parvati does not create a legacy or female genealogy. The only female relationship she possesses is with her mother, Mena, and its benevolence is questionable. It is believed that Parvati sought to be born to Mena due to her great devotion to Sati, and to wed Shiva (Kinsley, 1985:42). Her mother discourages her from performing *tapas* (austerities) to win Shiva's affection, thus straining their relationship and forcing Parvati to act alone (<http://www.freeindia.org>; Young, 1995:113-115). Throughout her marriage to Shiva, Parvati realises her notion of motherhood by contributing sweat and milk to Ganesha and Karttekiya respectively, thus fulfilling a domestic purpose. Although she is represented as having *shakti*, it is not her decision to control the creative process but only to reproduce the intentions and desires of the male deities in the Hindu mythic pantheon. In matrimony she is devoted to Shiva, regardless of the fact that he ignores her pleas. She calms the intensity of his being and saves the earth and the deities from destruction, but receives no reward or gratitude.

3.4 KALI

Kali is considered the primary *mahavidya*, one of the ten manifestations of Sati. Although Sati is generally a quiet and subservient character, her rage manifests in these ten forms. Kali therefore is portrayed as a strong independent female although tradition dictates she is interpreted allegorically (Kinsley, 1997:89). Other interpretations of Kali exist but do not serve to develop the direction of analysis in this paper. Whenever a woman is threatened or anxious then Kali appears; for instance, she manifested from Sati when she believed her husband was acting against his domestic duties to provide food and a home. Kali can be seen as Sati's audacity to question Shiva's actions and the entity that possesses the inner strength to overcome social restriction and action (Kinsley, 1997:83). She is the cycle, emotions and experiences of a woman's life, and the *mahavidyas* are the embodiment of the offended and betrayed woman. Kali and the remaining *mahavidyas* lack a locative aspect, they are not worshipped for their earthly characteristics such as fecundity, fertility and motherhood nor do they dwell upon and entertain such concepts. The quintessence of a Hindu goddess is to elaborate and demonstrate characteristics that are central to the female role in the social reality, yet Kali espouses the hidden emotion and anguish that is the silent preserve of women (Kinsley, 1996:80; Kinsley, 1997:50-68; Pintchman, 1994:120-121; Sugirtharajah, 1998:56-58; Young, 1987:96-100).

It is not simply a matter of interpreting symbols but often the very characteristics that Kali embodies that are used against women to control their movements and their bodies. It is the male who defines the ideal female in his subservient, coerced object and straying from this ideal is deemed unattractive and unwelcome. Kali can be interpreted in several ways but this paper focuses on two aspects, firstly, the attention to her physical appearance and secondly, how her social environment relates to the control of women and not simply her symbolic representation of ultimate reality.

Kali is frequently depicted in Hindu myth with black skin, disheveled hair, as emaciated and naked, garlanded with body parts and blood. She appears to be intoxicated, with a lolling tongue and four arms each performing a different act, often

portrayed beneath Ananta.¹⁰ Although much is made of Kali's dark skin, it should be remembered that Parvati too had a dark pallor and that it served little relevance other than as part of Brahma's attempt to dispel rumours of Sati's reincarnation (Kinsley, 1985:44; <http://www.freeindia.org>; Young, 1995:113; Rupal, 2001:1073-1075). It can be argued that Parvati sought a fairer skin tone due to Shiva taunting her as Kali (black), but her original dusky colour did not impact on her social status. She was still a princess, considered beautiful and devoted, all considered auspicious characteristics in a woman.

Elaborating on Kali's physical appearance, it is understood that disheveled hair amongst adult Hindu women is a sign of pollution; women loosen their hair after sexual intercourse, during menstruation, after childbirth and after the death of their husbands. On these occasions a woman is considered inauspicious and only after performing a ritual can she be cleansed. All *mahavidyas* have disheveled hair, thus emphasising their polluted state and their alienation within society, with only animal companions and without family structures (Kinsley, 1997:84; Knipe, 1991:54-57). Hindu women must maintain a structured hairstyle, displaying vermillion, if married, as a symbol of the strict and ordered lifestyle they adhere to (Leslie, 1989:34-40; Marglin, 1985a:39-42; Marglin, 1985b:94). The structured hairstyle demonstrates subdued sexuality and beauty, an elaboration of society's determination to control and manipulate the sexuality and latent heat of the female. Kali represents the overtly sexually dominant female that is not submissive to a male-ordered environment. Patriarchal social reality would argue that the disheveled hair represents an uncontrolled female who is threatening and dangerous to social structures, whereas subdued modesty and chastity represents an ideal.

The emaciated naked body further supports the argument that the female cannot control herself and is incapable of independence. As Kali is not dependent upon a male, she lacks the accoutrements that dependence and loyalty would provide. Her emaciation opposes an attachment to nature and fecundity, presenting a human body that is not conducive to fertility and reproduction. The body parts and blood are not only pollutants but also illustrate the female position, according to the *Laws of Manu*, as comparable to the lowest social order. It is the lowest group within the Hindu social hierarchy that

¹⁰ Ananta is a thousand-headed snake that also appears with Vishnu thereby illustrating Kali as part of the primordial creation myth (Kinsley, 1997:89).

disposes of bodies, blood and excreta. Kali is said to have entered Krishna and tasted excreta in order to demonstrate closeness to *Brahman* (the greater reality) (Kinsley, 1997:83; Sugirtharajah, 1998:58). Her nakedness is not only an affront to the social norms of displaying the female body but so is her bathing and drinking the blood of her enemies. She absorbs the blood, perhaps providing reason for the black pallor. As the blood coagulates and ages, it darkens, influencing the colour of her skin. Alternatively, her dark skin depicts her diet; thus a woman who observes proper dietary habits by rejecting meat should possess a fair skin whereas those without dietary restriction would possess darker hues. Dark skin, too, is regarded as inauspicious and unattractive in females but also indicative of hard labour and extreme hardship.

Although authors such as Kinsley (1996; 1997) and Gupta (1991) comment that Kali's lolling tongue arose from embarrassment about her hunger, I wish to add that it could also be indicative of madness. Within the social environment, the androcentric stereotype of the female creates a social position where women are secluded and constantly monitored. The stifled position results in the possible development of a latent madness raging in the minds of women. Kali's behaviour would suggest that the only manner in which this madness can be expressed is to commit the most destructive and offensive acts that would go against the prescribed social norms. This would explain the dismemberment of bodies, parading decapitated heads, limbs and the consumption of blood and flesh. Several interpretations claim that Kali appears intoxicated (Kinsley, 1997:80-83; Ranade, 1983:16-18), providing another reminder of the ecstasy of symbolic escape from social and spatial restrictions placed upon married women. These acts symbolise the deliberate breach with the normative ideal. Kali's behaviour represents the turmoil brewing within the female who has finally escaped and avenged her downtrodden persona on those who have abused her dignity and loyalty. However, in all the depictions of Kali, she displays no severed female heads, only those of males. Several scholars claim that the heads represents those that have achieved spiritual enlightenment and have no use for the body (Marglin, 1985a:43-44; Kinsley, 1997:53). Such sentiment supports the notion that females cannot realise spiritual enlightenment unless reincarnated as a man. Instead, women exist to serve their male relatives, never establishing benevolent female relationships, for such engagement would be construed as destructive.

Kali's lolling tongue is a threatening gesture of confrontation, as her attire indicates that she is prepared for battle. The physical site of cemeteries and battlegrounds illustrate that she not only challenges the social dictate that prevents women from participating in battle but she also transcends social boundaries by beckoning the challenge brought by the male demons. Kali is summoned to battle when Durga needs a female slayer; or, alternatively, perhaps she views male-constructed society as demonic. It is Kali who is summoned to kill Ravana and Raktabija (Kinsley, 1997:70-74; Rupal, 2001:1090) and both these demons can be interpreted as symbols of the oppressive and frightening social reality for women.

I believe that Kali's facial expression is subject to two interpretations: she is either smiling or laughing. These concepts are vastly different in defining the psyche of the goddess. If she were smiling it could be deduced that she possesses a truth, knowledge that only an initiate would comprehend. Her implication might be that spiritual seekers in the socially constrained environment might be incorrect in their ways of pursuing *moksha* and her smile is therefore a mockery of the constraints that adherents have placed upon themselves in pursuit of salvation. It would make Kali a very important goddess in terms of truth and spirituality and would certainly include her in creation and the ultimate reality. However, if laughing, I believe it would alter this enlightened perception, reducing her impact on a spiritual level of truth and knowledge. Instead, her interaction and mental imagery would be symbolic of chaos and the depravity of her environment that has driven her insane. The carnage and the mayhem have disrupted the controlled serenity of the female, which could thus be used as a social constraint against permitting women from participating in warfare as the random violence would destabilise them. Raucous laughter indicates the instability within the *mahavidya* and the frenetic behaviour of a female without social constraints.

Kali presents a very interesting phenomenon particularly when dependent on whether the interpretation is literal or allegorical. The immense contrast between the characters of Kali and Sita, for instance, translates into social interpretations of the social environment. Sita's life is personified and used as a literalist ideology that defines ideal female conduct within her social reality. However, Kali is determined differently: she is not to be personified nor is her behaviour to be deconstructed as relating to the female

psyche (Kinsley, 1996:83-85; Gupta, 1991:32-35; Jayaram, 2000: <http://www.hinduwebsite.com>). Instead, this strong character is to be interpreted allegorically. This mode of interpretation is surely related to a male-defined social reality that desires women to be subservient and self-sacrificing rather than independent and strong-willed.

3.5 DHUMAVATI

Another manifestation of Sati, and a *mahavidya* (Kinsley, 1985:42), is Dhumavati, who possesses a similar social orientation as Kali, though she embodies the sentiments of the old widow. Her physical appearance is that of a bedraggled, lonely woman seated on a chariot with a banner of crows. She is said to be very unattractive, miserable and dirty. She has large, pendulous breasts that reach her navel and she is eternally hungry (Kinsley, 1997:179-180). Scholars and priests are eager to enunciate that she relays favours, in terms of ascetism, but is personified in terms of her abhorrence of the married couple (Kinsley, 1997:181). I suggest that Dhumavati can also be identified as the senior wife in a polygamous marriage as discussed in Bennett (1983), as she, too, is considered inauspicious. She represents a social reality for many widowed Hindu women (and senior wives) and the disdain that society accords them. Unlike Kali, whose appearance is to be taken allegorically (Marglin, 1985a:43-44; Kinsley, 1997:53), Dhumavati's appearance relates to much of the social prejudice and disdain about her appearance, her choice of companions and her social environment. She represents the limited choices available to impoverished, lonely and inauspicious women who are ostracised from the community. As such, she is lonely, devoid of benevolent female relationships.

Like Kali she manifests in response to anger, frustration and insult, hence their appearances and behaviour are responsive to the social environment. Two myths account for her origin, the first that she was created from the fire in which Sati sacrificed herself and secondly that she consumed Shiva in response to his unwillingness to feed Sati (Kinsley, 1997:181-182; Kinsley, 1985:34; <http://www.freeindia.org>).

Kinsley suggests that Dhumavati is representative of the ultimate reality (as are the other *mahavidyas*) and that she displays the asceticism needed for the individual to achieve *moksha* (salvation), understanding of the realities of the spiritual and

transcendence of the constraints of social parameters (Kinsley, 1997:183). Dhumavati is a figurative display of the needs of the individual seeking truth, and particularly so for women, although textual reference to the latter as such are rare. In reality, much of this *mahavidya* knowledge is reserved for men, in terms of transcending the established norms; although female deities, their message is not for the female adherent. Kinsley further adds that Dhumavati manifests within *Mahapralaya* at the end of the cosmic age when the universe is dissolved and returned to smoke. She personifies the concept of time, illustrated in her thousand-name hymn, where she inhabits three forms that represent time, that of the young maiden in the morning, the married women in a red sari at noon and the old widowed crone in the evening (Kinsley, 1997: 188; Pintchman, 1994:180; Dalrymple, 1999b:51-54). Created from smoke she permeates two worlds, contributing meaning to the concepts of destruction and creation. Thus, as a senior wife or widow, Dhumavati demonstrates her two worlds; she was initially young, fertile and innocent but has grown old, barren and wise. Now as an old woman she no longer benefits the social environment and because of her ability to create a benevolent relationship with her daughters and other female relations, the male-dominated society seeks to demonise her and remove her from the community.

Comparisons exist equally within spiritual interpretation, such that inauspicious and auspicious deities are approached on an equal level of understanding. The benevolent deity is not superior to the malevolent and both standpoints of the deities are viewed with the same consciousness. In the social reality the benevolent sympathetic character is transposed onto the female as acceptable behaviour. As such, behaviour deemed unsuitable under mundane circumstances is acceptable when interpreted in a spiritual manner. It is therefore prescribed in the *Mantra-Mahodadhik* that enlightenment be sought in cremation grounds or upon corpses, in order to detach the mind from the norms of the social environment. Another suggestion is the use of fetuses and dead children found in the *Komalasana*, which explains the *mahavidyas*', particularly Kali's, relationship with blood, depravity and fetuses. These negative social concepts are imbued with *shakti* and for the spiritual observer it must be understood and appreciated as part of the creative and destructive process. On the mundane level these concepts portray women as evil and misguided, incapable of determining a sacred path for other females to

follow (Kinsley, 1997:233-234; Ranade, 1983:15-20; Jayaram, 2000:

<http://www.hinduwebsite.com/shktis.>).

Although Kinsley assumes that scholars place too much emphasis on the physical and personal characteristics of the *mahavidyas* rather than on allegorical emphasis that projects symbolic significance in terms of creation and destruction, I feel that it is important to look at the physical appearance and the social reality in which these characters are portrayed. Hindu society dictates that subservient deities are to be understood in a literal sense, but that of the strong independent archetype, such as Kali, must be translated in a figurative sense. Perhaps Dhumavati is particularly relevant as a woman for women, in that she personifies the reality but offers a path for women to tread that transcends the social boundaries set for Hindu women. Unlike the social instruction that prescribes female worship for male prosperity, here is a goddess that offers female prosperity and avenues for realising and understanding spiritual progression.

The physical appearance of Dhumavati plays a significant role in the physical reality of the Hindu female. She depicts the Hindu widow draped in a white sari, with no material assets. Her sari is often said to be dirty, having been taken from a corpse in the cremation ground, but it can also be interpreted as the dress of someone who has been deserted by her family upon whom she was economically dependent. A financially destitute woman often degrades her dignity in order to survive and for this she is often considered inauspicious. Dhumavati has no beast or person to pull her chariot, she has no access and no means by which to gain independence. Similarly, the senior wife can also be interpreted in this way in that she lacks financial independence and social respect, and she, too, is considered inauspicious (Mitter, 1991:69-71; Leslie, 1991a:110-112; Erndl, 1993:25-30). As a widow, the senior wife's life is at a standstill, emotionally deserted by her husband. As his asset or possession, she is deserted on the chariot of marriage. The owner of the chariot, the deceased husband, has deserted his female asset and his marriage. Others have perhaps taken her possessions and luxuries and cast her aside. Alone and miserable, cast out from the social order, she is now inauspicious.

Dhumavati has disheveled hair and dark wrinkled skin, non-flattering characteristics that illustrate the non-conformity of the character and social distaste for old women. Surrounded by crows, carrion eaters that dwell amongst corpses, Dhumavati

represents the widow and senior wife who, to her husband and family, might as well be dead - and she is virtually treated as such in society. This is particularly true of the young widow, attractive to males but a social outcast and pariah. Unlike the old widow who is infertile, wrinkled and worn out through the praxis of raising children, the young widow is fertile, youthful and beautiful (Rajan, 1993:140; Bennett, 1983b:268-275). She threatens the Hindu socio-political establishment that cannot accommodate her.

Hindu attitudes toward the widow convey that she has performed unfavourably in her life (or past lives) as a dutiful and loyal wife. She has sacrificed her husband through her inauspicious behaviour. In her widowed form she attracts evil spirits and omens, making her a fearful component in the social environment. When men feel attracted to the young widow that is forbidden by Hindu law, the situation is further complicated.

Symbolically, the positive aspect of Dhumavati's character is her inspiration to widows, who no longer possess domestic responsibility and servitude to their husbands and are relegated to social irrelevance, for now they can pursue spiritual enlightenment. The journey of spiritual progression is a solitary undertaking, with no family involvement or devotion, uncluttered by luxury and pleasantries, and therefore suitable for the renunciate (Kinsley, 1997:184; Rajan, 1993:131; Rupal, 2001:1068-1070; Bennett, 1983a:302-305). Widowhood liberates an abused wife. If she undertakes pilgrimages to achieve enlightenment, this relieves her sons of economic responsibility and prevents her from creating alliances with her daughters-in-law and granddaughters. Male lineage thus continues without female intervention, and the socialised structure of the female object is maintained through the control mechanisms of the male subject. Only young, virile and owned/married women, who maintain and elevate the position of the male subject, are accommodated. The *mahavidyas*, however, contradict this social order by promoting sexual relations with lower-caste women, especially in the context of tantric rites. But what of the renunciate female? Can she engage in sexual experiences with lower-caste men and male prostitutes, and how are women to perform their tantric rites, such as the left-handed tantra? Kinsley claims never to have heard of or seen tantric rites written for women by women, implying that renunciation differs from men to women (Kinsley, 1997:249-250; Rajan, 1993:130-131; Knipe, 1991:65). Although encouraged by religious literature, men still have a choice in opting for asceticism that transcends social

boundaries by entertaining the five forbidden *tattvas*. But women are literally forced into renunciation as their families and communities refuse to assist them, financially and emotionally, and choose to regard them as inauspicious and troublesome (Dalrymple, 1999b:52-55).

The female occupies an object status within Hindu society, her roles constructed and controlled by male relatives. Dhumavati is the discarded, used woman who no one elects to communicate with. She appears quarrelsome and lonely, lacking association with others. She symbolises female isolation and dependence subjected to male dominance; her abandonment on the chariot and her lack of wealth shows abandonment by her male relatives. As such, the female is perceived not to attain similar levels of spirituality as males. The male-dominated environment allows men to choose to relinquish notions of wealth and status, but as the female never amasses these, she cannot repudiate what she never possessed. The female binds the male to the earth, to reproduction and humanity, thus representing the mundane. If the female is equated with earth, then the male is interpreted as being celestial. As much of the spiritual and social interpretations of Hindu myth were and continue to be determined by a male-dominated society, women continue to struggle to assume equal spiritual access to the divine as do men. Dhumavati symbolically demonstrates that the male has undertaken a spiritual journey, whereas the female remains alone, isolated and ignorant; solely the companion to her husband.

CHAPTER FOUR: INTERPRETING THE *RAMAYANA* HEROINE, SITA

The symbolic significance of Sita's position as wife of the king of Ayodhya, Rama, can be interpreted along two lines, first as that of a human and secondly as a greater representation of cultivated land and its engagement with man. Both scenarios place the female in an isolated and submissive role, creating a foundation for male supremacy. Sita is a tragic character and a mournful reflection on feminine ideals. As a central character in one of the great Hindu epics, Valmiki's¹¹ *Ramayana* perseveres in maintaining her steadfast support of and self-sacrificing persona for her husband. She epitomises devotion and respect, expecting little in return. Although Sita suffered Rama's arrogance, vanity and perception of honour, he is perceived as the ideal man who possesses the powerful characteristics of heroism, virtue, control, strength and emotional apathy. Sita's suffering is not considered in terms of Rama's personal character because he epitomises the ideal for the male-constructed paradigm of strength - both mental and physical. Rama's reaction to Sita is interpreted as appropriate in terms of his heroic behaviour (Hess, 1999:2).¹² In the *Ramayana*, Sita is exiled, raising her children alone and establishing the domestic norm that men do not participate in rearing children, other than establishing the patriarchal norm as an elder male. As the sons mature the father moves in to guide them away from their mother, in order to create a dominant male lineage over the feminine. As Sita produces no daughters there is no development of a continued female lineage; she becomes the alienated female, lacking daughters, a human mother, sisters and nieces.

Irigaray stated that the female sacrifices herself in order that the male can be defined, as can be seen from the interaction between Rama and Sita. Sita's challenges tested Rama, who defended his humanity over his anthropo-cosmic origin and divine form as a

¹¹ Valmiki is the great sage believed to have written the *Ramayana*. For an excellent and concise summary of the *Ramayana* narrative, see Kinsley's *Hindu Goddesses* (1985).

¹² Rama is a *sat-parusa*, the ideal man devoted to truth, the fountain of righteousness and welfare (Venkatsananda, 1998:48).

reincarnation of Vishnu.¹³ Rama's followers and citizens attached perfection to his personality and yet he was plagued by the mortal, base traits that kept him earthbound; he was proud, jealous and insecure. It was Sita's suffering, in the physical sense, that best revealed Rama's weaknesses, leaving him to suffer the psychological trauma. It is regrettable that the myth has been interpreted purely from the patriarchal angle that portrays Sita as the model wife, alone, committed and self-sacrificing.¹⁴ Other than in the service of the husband, a woman has no purpose or reason for worship and religious adherence such as fasting and praying. Always alone, Sita never seeks emotional support or attachment from another.

On assuming that Rama is dead, tricked by the magic of the demon king, Ravana, who has abducted her, Sita states that, "Alas, O Rama you have adhered to your dharma; but I have been widowed. Widowhood is considered an undesirable tragedy in the life of a woman devoted to dharma" (*Ramayana*, Yuddha 32:285; see Venkatesananda, 1988). However, if the epic of the *Ramayana* is to illustrate the fallibility of man, then why place such great emphasis on his wife? The interaction between Sita, Hanuman and Lakshmana, Rama's lieutenant and brother respectively, demonstrates that Rama's perfection is fraught with difficulties, in a human form, best illustrated in his determination to validate Sita's purity and chastity to others. Sita, as the reincarnation of Vedavati (whom Ravana had attempted to marry), is important in interpreting the epic. When Ravana touched Vedavati's hair she cursed him, claiming that she would return (as Sita), without the need to be born from a woman; she then immolated her body in the purifying fire, as she had been polluted by Ravana (Venkatesananda, 1988; Uttara 18:362;

¹³ Rama says, "I consider myself a human being, Rama the son of Dasaratha" (Venkatesananda, 1988:356).

¹⁴ "...the wife alone shares the life of her husband. To a woman, neither father nor son nor mother nor friends but the husband alone is her sole refuge here in this world and the other world too" (*Ramayana*, Ayodhya 26-27:64; Venkatesananda, 1988). Also, Anasuya, wife of sage Atri, says to Sita, "...You have done the right thing, O Sita, by following your noble husband, abandoning your relations and friends....for noble women the husband alone is supreme god. Serve your husband, treating him as your god" (*Ramayana*, Ayodhya 116-117:121; Venkatesananda, 1988).

that the strong independent female is not born from a female womb but possesses only a powerful father (Irigaray, 1984a:57-58; Korte, 1994:73). Sita's profound lack of relationships, other than defending a male-ordered existence of female purity and chastity, is being threatened by a male, Ravana, who is a competitor for this particular male-ordered environment belonging to Rama.

There are several autobiographical pieces within the *Ramayana*, the *axis mundi* linking all gender relations as replications of the relationship between Rama and Sita. Men remain the focus of the epic, regardless of whether their characters are malevolent or benign; the female forms part of the background, playing out support for the character of the dominant male. Women are not supposed to express their emotions and relationships with daughters or sisters, but rather these emotions become symbolised as the ideal feminine. In the *Ramayana*, Kushadhvaja, wished his daughter, Vedavati, to wed Vishnu, and many suitors were rejected. When Shambhu murdered Vedavati's father, her mother self-immolated to continue serving her husband rather than attend to her yet unmarried daughter. Vedavati, however, determined to fulfil her father's wishes, performed austerities so that she could wed Vishnu (*Ramayana*, Uttara 17-18:362; Venkatesananda, 1988). This story indicates how the female is permitted independent thought when it benefits the male-ordered environment, illustrating that a woman is not an individual being but rather an ordered extension of the male-dominated environment. Her actions serve to demonstrate to readers that a female creates and maintains patriarchal social reality such that when Sita is banished from Ayodhya, due to Rama's fear of public scandal, she says to Lakshmana, "what great sin should I have committed in a previous birth" (*Ramayana*, Uttara 48-49; Venkatesananda, 1988; Hess, 1999:21-23; Gold, 1994:33; Rupal, 2001:1072). Social complications are female responsibilities; the woman is the guardian of male destiny and maintainer of his social reality (Rajan, 1993:142-144; Leslie, 1989:98-100; Leslie, 1991b:179-183).

Even Rama's brother, Lakshmana himself, finds Sita's banishment, hinged on public scandal, inappropriate. He regards this distance instituted by Rama as an improper method in dealing with the situation. It might appear that Lakshmana is the greater man in concluding that Rama's action was somewhat extreme but that Sita's behaviour was admirable and undeserving of the ridicule shown by Rama's vanity. However,

admirable and undeserving of the ridicule shown by Rama's vanity. However, Lakshmana reiterates to Rama that, "one should not be too greatly attached to one's wife, sons, friends and wealth for one is certain to part from them" thus ratifying the position that regardless of the conduct of the female she must adhere to the dictates of her spouse (*Ramayana*, Uttara 49; Venkatesananda, 1988; Rupal, 2001:1069; Smith, 1991:25-27).

The great sage, Valmiki himself, assures Rama of Sita's purity and chastity, yet Rama insists that Sita proves this (Venkatesananda, 1988:402; Hess, 1999:28-29), further degrading this woman by again forcing her to appear before an assembly of men.¹⁵ Although Rama continues to imply that he is aware of Sita's purity one is apt to think that he inwardly questions whether she is faithful and pure. If he regards Sita as a possession, then it seems he doubts the value of his 'asset'. If after proving her chastity once before the gods and an assembly of Rama's army, by entering the sacred fire and emerging unscathed, scandal still thrived, why would it dissipate again after a second immolation? Sita mirrors the psychological limitations of humanity and adopts a position of superior conduct to that of Rama's by simply turning her back on social regulation and gossip. Rama, still unable to grasp her intentions and more concerned with displaying his power and authority, is told by Brahma the creator that, "the chaste and devoted Sita has naturally gone ahead of you to the other world" (Venkatesananda, 1988:402-403, Kinsley, 1985:123-125).

4.1 SITA: PERSONIFICATION OF LAND

Rama's behaviour toward Sita can be interpreted as an attitude not based on human interaction but rather on a relationship that man possesses with nature. In Hindu myths, kings demonstrated the fecundity and qualities of the earth through their ability to use, exploit and abandon certain tracts of land to stimulate production (Kinsley, 1985:66-67). Rama is the ideal king reflected as such in his ability to manipulate the earth. He views

¹⁵ "If Sita is free from unchaste conduct, then let her come here, escorted by the sage Valmiki and prove her purity. Let her present herself tomorrow morning here in this august assembly" (Venkatesananda, 1988: 402).

his relationship with the earth as a duty, an environment to be yielded, controlled and subjected; regardless of the generosity of the earth, it will never suffice. It is the environment (Sita) that must provide and subvert, promoting the integrity and magnificence of the king. Sita provides the quintessence of earth's fertility for the dominant, male social reality; she is not part of the symbolic discourse that defines the social realm but rather she is the natural environment, whereby her reactions provide symbolic imagery for the social reality of males.

The *Ramayana* portrays Sita as the ideal female lacking a natural birth and devoid of the mother-daughter bond born through autochthony. According to the myth, her father, King Janaka, produces Sita from the earth. Not emerging from a womb reduced the possibility of pollution during the birth process, although she was expelled from a dark, damp environment that renders the female with cunning and guile, as represented in androcentric Hindu literature (Kinsley, 1985:68; Choudhury, 1998:107; Marglin, 1985a:40-41; Babb, 1970:139-142; Carmody, 1989:39-41). Aside from the humanity that Sita represents there is clarity in the individual that she characterises. A correlation can be drawn between the personalities of Sita's father, Janaka, and her husband, Rama. Janaka's magnificence is his ability to manipulate the earth to produce Sita, who is won by Rama and further utilised to render magnificence to the king and his social environment. That a king is credited with the fertility of the earth accounts for a personal relationship that is jealously guarded by a monarch.

Sita's kidnapping by Ravana can be interpreted as the military defeat of Rama and claim to his land (Sita), and the power he exerted over one long coveted by another. However, Rama's weakness can be attributed to the spiritual dilemma that inauspiciousness prevailed over the earth at that moment; this arose when castes other than *brahmins* were performing austerities. In another Hindu text, the *Krita Yuga*, it is mentioned that austerities performed by a *shudra* in his spiritually polluted state brought illness and despair to the *brahmins*. Such an event allowed for the possibility of Rama's defeat as the earth was unsettled and in spiritual turmoil resulting from the actions of a polluted *shudra*.¹⁶ Rama decapitates the *shudra*, Shambuka in order to restore the earth's

¹⁶ In this age, the *shudra* (servant class) is characterised by unrighteousness, and such a one taking to austerities is the cause of the death of this boy (*brahmana*). When Rama

equilibrium (Venkatesananda, 1988:391-392). Similarly, because Ravana is an inauspicious character in the *Ramayana*, he is not able to yield favourable results from the earth, so its appearance is degraded and polluted for the king who sees his environment being manipulated and controlled by another male. That her appearance degrades during Rama's absence is another aspect of agricultural neglect¹⁷ (Kinsley, 1985:72).

Kinsley adds that Rama was reduced to near madness due to Sita's disappearance but is rescued by his brother Lakshmana (Kinsley, 1985:70; Hess, 1999:18). Recalling Irigaray's theory that male madness is temporary whereas that of the female is permanent (Irigaray, 1980a:10-11), it could be argued that Rama was relieved of his madness so that the social reality could normalise and be productive. He was alleviated of his condition by another male, his brother, rather than by a female, his wife, who succumbs to madness permanently. Only when he transcends his insanity does he seek to re-establish his honour by re-initiating control over his land (Sita) and his family name. By recovering Sita, Rama displays to his army and male colleagues that he has restored his dignity and family honour. He has recaptured his desired property and defeated his enemy; as he represents the ideal of humanity he is not subservient to his asset, and as a spiritual and auspicious individual he can dispose of his property at will, without emotional attachment (Hess, 1999:5). The art of war and the reclamation of land are strategically vital in restoring the mental and physical strength of the male, since the female is irrelevant to the maintenance of the male ego. Thus Rama's speech to Sita makes sense when he relates to her that he has not rescued her and defeated Ravana for her sake, but to restore family honour (Venkatesananda, 1988:341; Kamat, 2001: <http://www.kamat.com/sati>). Irigaray's theory promotes the notion that the male is driven by inanimate symbols, such as pride, bravado, honour and righteousness, that grant him superiority in the eyes of other men (Irigaray, 1984b:75-76). However, it is the natural assets such as land that have provided him with the opportunity to realise his access to these inanimate symbols.

encountered Shambuka he beheaded him with his sword receiving boons from the gods who were delighted by his actions (Venkatesananda, 1988:391-392).

¹⁷ Hanuman saw a radiant woman with an ascetic appearance, though her garments were soiled, she was emaciated constantly sighing (Venkatesananda, 1988:236-237).

Sita's self-immolation appears hysterical but it is the ultimate sacrifice that the feminine renders to the masculine. In this manner Rama demonstrates his power and ego when the female sacrifices herself so that he can appear superior, virtuous and divine.¹⁸

Sita's response appears hysterical in comparison to her husband's monotone and her emotion seems to extend beyond reasoning and dialogue. Rama is conscious of his audience, addressing them rather than Sita, a display of bravado rather than his true interest in her. Sita, as a symbol of the feminine, is unable to comprehend Rama's inner turmoil, as she is not part of his social environment and cannot understand the linguistic complexity of his discourse. Constrained in her ability to enact dialogue, the male, Rama, does not hear her pleas. Instead Sita appears to personify madness, choosing fire as recourse to Rama's monotone that is directed elsewhere rather than to her. Her 'silent' madness that cannot be understood by the other males present in the assembly can only be understood when Agni (God of Fire) steps forward and prevents her death; but without his voice, Sita's actions and her ultimate sacrifice of her life would not have been understood. It is important to note that Sita is the only female present when she is being sacrificed for the sake of the male social reality. Only a male (Agni) can interpret the actions of the female before other males can understand her motive and actions. The couple fails to engage and understand each other, although the female is sacrificed to maintain the ideals and vanity of male, abstract constructions. As the male is unaware that the female is engaging in this self-sacrifice for his sake, he fails to appreciate and understand her motives.

Also relevant to the position of Sita is a particular verse in the *Laws of Manu* regarding woman's place in life: " her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (*Manu-dharma sastra* (9.3); see Buhler, 1964: 703). This can be construed as the relationship a man possesses with the land he oversees. A hierogamy exists between man and land and these laws transcend humanity illustrating the desire for male control and protection due to the yield potential and cultivation of the earth. Agricultural land is never independent and it needs the constant vigilance of the farmer to yield its potential passed on in generations of

¹⁸ He has defeated his enemies, gathered an assembly of men and regained his asset, Sita, yet he has the power to accept or reject it/her.

primogeniture. For example, early on in the *Ramayana* narrative, Sita is instructed by Rama to remain under the protection of her in-laws, which best indicates that the remaining male relatives of the husband/farmer will protect the female earth (Kinsley, 1985:71).

However, Sita is also *shakti* (universal energy), possessing an inner heat that purifies and protects her.¹⁹ Fire cleanses the land from impurities, rendering it more attractive, more fertile and yielding. When Sita is subjected to a fire ordeal, it is to ascertain her purity but surreptitiously also illustrates that a woman cannot be trusted (Flood, 1998:38; Rupal, 2001: 1070-1072; Leslie, 1989:100; Smith, 1991:21). In an agricultural schema the fire purifies the earth preparing her for new growth. Aside from the symbolic significance of Sita as simply a mythological character, it is plausible that in terms of the male social reality, land and its productivity are worshipped to reflect on the male ego in seeking to control and guard his land against other males utilising it. Personifying the land transfers this obsession with control to an individual female, who has to maintain a symbolic role. That the reputation of the king is uppermost in the mind of Sita reflects that the character of the monarch is played out on the fecundity of the earth, showing how it obeys him, regardless of his human emotions (Kinsley, 1985:73).²⁰

How is Sita's self-immolation to be interpreted as a vehicle for women to prove their fidelity? Perhaps there is a misinterpretation in transferring the actions of the personification of land to that of the human where the dependency and subordination are paramount for Sita's survival, inasmuch as she is autochthonic. Sita bears Lava and Kusa, but no daughters, renouncing that development of mother-daughter relationship.

¹⁹ In a soliloquy Hanuman relates after burning Lanka's houses that he might have mistakenly killed Sita, "...if Rama hears of Sita having been burnt in the fire, he will die, so will Laksmana, Surgiva and all the people of Ayodhya,....but surely Sita cannot be consumed by fire. Fire does not burn fire! Sita is immune to the effects of fire" (Venkatesananda, 1988:260-261).

²⁰ Sita relates, " I am suffering intolerable anguish on account of my separation from my beloved husband, I am unable to give up my life....Fie upon human birth, fie upon the state of dependence upon others, as a result of which I cannot even give up my life." (Venkatesananda, 1988:242).

Yet the sons' names are important, as they are named after grass. It is land that produces grass and the quality of the soil determines the quality of the product it yields. Her sons are thus provided with a matrilineal lineage and although Rama eventually enthrones them, the citizens desert the city of Ayodhya to follow Rama, suggesting that they return the city to their mother and her social environment (Surgirharajah, 1998:61). Without Rama's protection and respect Sita cannot project her magnificence, and her return to the Goddess Mahdavi suggests that the land will no longer yield to Rama as he has lost faith in its auspiciousness and purity. When Rama leaves Ayodhya, the city is enveloped by Sita's earthly realm and she and her children are reunited, whereas Rama returns to the cosmic realm.

4.2 SITA: THE WOMAN

Sita and Rama's relationship can be understood as the unity of autochthonic and divine origins, respectively. The personification of the earth is a construct that aids a social reality based on an androcentric male-controlled environment in which the female is objectified. That the myth of Rama and Sita is used to project the role and expectations of the female in society is misogynist and extremely cruel, yet it demonstrates the inability of the male-dominant psyche to view the female as subject rather than object. Patriarchal structure defines the socio-political environment, as well as the notion that all that is contained within the environment, including concepts and the symbols, should be pliable to the desires and whims of the subjects. Waardenburg suggests that those who occupy power structures invoke and manipulate the symbolic in order to legitimate their aims and motivations (Waardenburg, 1980:47-50). The non-responsive environment lacks a self-defined agenda, instead conforming to the symbols of the existing dominant, socio-political system created by men. It is not the subject that needs to be responsive, but rather the objects and the environment that need to conform, to demonstrate the authority of the subject.

It becomes the responsibility of the object, the female, to subordinate her self-determination to veneration of the subject's intentions. The female exhausts herself in loyalty, domesticity, subservience, resorting to humiliation, to benefit the male authority. This shows the paramount significance of total sacrifice of the object, as a display of

loyalty. In this system of loyalty and subservience, there is alienation of the female object from other females, reducing attachment and the ability to alter the position of the object in the social reality. However, the mother-in-law should not be considered part of a mother-daughter bond and rather as an *Athena*-type character who erodes the self-determinist attitude of the female object and redirects her to conform to her symbolic and social reality. Irigaray believes that the *Athena* engages with the daughter-in-law in subverting her into being the ideal symbol of the social environment. There is no developed relationship between Queen Kausalya and Sita; Rama places commitment to his mother above that of his wife. Kinsley adds that the female sees herself in relation to others, accommodating the needs of others over her own, for she exists solely to recognise and fulfil these needs. Sita is the model for the female devotee - where she is the ideal devotee to a god a mortal woman is an ideal devotee to her husband (Kinsley, 1985:77-80; Leslie, 1989:100; Lelie, 1991a:110-111; Marglin, 1985a:40).

The character of Sita has undergone a transformation from the mythical character to an historical ideal in order to promote her personification and sanction the object, thus symbolising the ideal Hindu female. The manner by which the characters of Rama and Sita alter subtly over time, through the omission of a word or the lack of emotion, alters the exchange between the characters greatly, as analysed by Linda Hess in her article 'Rejecting Sita' (1999). Interpreting her argument, I have concluded that Rama's speech has become less emotive and less directed toward Sita, seeming rather to be engaged with the audience more than directly with Sita.²¹ The lack of emotion renders a monotone that seems to be revolve around Sita, yet is not addressed to her; hence, Sita's responses appear motivated by guilt more so than persecution, because her husband's speech has been altered. Sita's speech is silenced and her reaction is self-motivated rather than responsive to Rama's accusations. Her behaviour and sacrifice appear to be done out of personal need to appease Rama's ego rather than defending her innocence. It now appears that Rama is not goading Sita to destruction but rather unwittingly jibes her to

²¹ Rama says, " My purpose has been accomplished, my prowess has been witnessed by all." (Venkatesananda, 1988:341)

prove her chastity.²² Her sacrifice now appears as an over-reaction to Rama's utterance, which is devoid of emotion and tone, leaving Sita to perform her task out of hysteria and in silence. Rama cannot hear her pleas nor does he comprehend her language for she is not part of his social reality and androcentric orientation; she is merely a defined object that should only communicate in a specific manner. As Lakshmana relieves Rama of madness, Sita is left in hysteria by the masculine that makes no attempt to placate or understand her actions. The female is left in her self-afflicted madness unaided by female relatives and benevolence, which portrays her as unstable, inferior and unintelligible. This female insanity further illustrates the male necessity to take control, protect and guide this female who is undermined by her self-induced madness that leads to chaos and disaster.

²² Rama's heart was in a state of conflict, he feared public scandal. Rama wept listening to the cries of women witnessing Sita's immolation (Venkatesananda, 1988:342).

CHAPTER FIVE: THE LACK OF BENEVOLENT FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN HINDU MYTHOLOGY AND SOCIAL REALITY

5.1 MYTHOLOGY

Although the female deities are approached when supporting women in their quest for domestic perfection in the form of male children and husbands, it should be noted that most of these deities are not reproductive and socialise exclusively with their husbands. Sati and Sita lack relationships with their mothers, and it is debatable as to whether Sita's relationship with the earth can truly be understood as being that of a mother. Women are expected to mimic these deities yet the social reality of a woman is far more complex than that of the goddesses Sita and Parvati, who are immortal and perfect in demeanour. Irigaray stated that these divine women are the guardians of the religious tradition and because they comply with their spouses needs they do not construct a divine role for women (Irigaray, 1984a:63-64). As much of the literature is interpreted by male commentators, it would appear that there would be little interest in promoting benevolent female relationships, nor in a male-dominated society would there be encouragement for strengthening psychological bonds that could develop beyond the intentions of androcentric interests.

Instead, male commentators have interpreted the feminine aspect of the mythology as an ideal; women to be emulated in their behaviour are those most notably devoted to their spouses (Leslie, 1989:89-95; Bennett, 1983a:214-218; Cooley, 1997:141-145). There appears to be greater social impetus put on the behaviour of deities than on adherence to the *Laws of Manu*, although with the social limitations of literacy in some areas where Hinduism exists, it is easier to relate to mythology than laws. Yet, even then, the application of the laws is selective, promoting a male-controlled and female-subjected society. Transferring the actions of deities often forces women to accommodate indignant and crude expectations of their being; these women are compelled by a society that instructs such adherence as a duty to honouring families and communities.

Sita confines women to a cage of ideals that are impossible for the mortal woman to realise; in fact, her desire to perform self-immolation places every woman under suspicion, since the likelihood of any woman remaining unscathed through flames is virtually impossible. Women are only venerated and respected once they are burned alive as Sati. The responsibility of the widow is not to support her daughters and entertain the notion of being a matriarch, but rather to sever her relationships and follow her husband on his funeral pyre, ensuring his entry to heaven. Regardless of the life that her spouse has led, it is her responsibility to support him (Leslie, 1989:100-110; Bennett, 1983a:215; Dalrymple, 1999b:50-52; Kamat, 2001: <http://www.kamat.com/sati>). The daughter loses her mother, and the father who controlled the position of the mother continues to do so even in death. Through the use of Hindu mythology the act of self-immolation has prevented the development of a female lineage, undermining the development of benevolent female relations.

Females are cast as negative entities whose actions must be curtailed. Yet why are men exempted from the need to imitate the gods and epic heroes? Instead, these deities are promoted as great personalities to ordinary believing men; but believing women are reared to emulate their deities and heroines, re-enacting their decisions, particularly those that are harmful and often life-threatening. Men are not expected to engage in similar acts of the gods²³ as it would be considered a character trait of arrogance. Yet interpretations of the *Ramayana* epic are selective and the only female ideals accommodated are those that depict the woman in a submissive, repentant position. Why can the early death of a female then not be construed as her disillusionment with her spouse and her community, as compared with Sita's return? Sita returns to her mother, the goddess of earth, unhappy with her circumstances and her constant attempt to defend her person before her husband, who was more concerned with public opinion than with his personal happiness. If women are expected to understand much of the *Ramayana* in terms of a literary ideal, then Sita's demise should defend the wife who feels helpless and unappreciated in her marriage. She should be able to walk away and return to her maternal home. Sita defends the maternal, her return validates a female position in

²³ Rama was only half of the manifestation of Vishnu, the other half was shared between Bharata, Laksmana and Satruguna (Venkatesananda, 1988:13).

society that offers more shelter and protection than the patriarchal construction will ever entertain for a woman. Yet the patriarchal social structure removes the daughter from her family and severs the bond with her mother so that she dissociates herself from other familial females (daughters, nieces, sisters), as they too will eventually leave the maternal home.²⁴ Often disregarded and ignored within her marriage and home, a mother venerates her sons, whereas she distances herself from her daughters in the way that she, too, experienced in her maternal home.

Irigaray has argued that although women may produce, it is the father who is the most important person to the son (Irigaray, 1980a:12-13). Similarly, Sita's sons are then to be reared in the image of their father,²⁵ thus continuing male-dominant socio-political development. It is to protect this social concept of a subservient wife and mother that Rama recalls Sita from the wilderness when he hears of her two sons. He considers it his male duty to separate the mother from the socialisation of sons by removing her from determining their socio-political development. It seems Rama accepts Sita's virtue and morality when he discovered that she had borne him sons, yet would he have interpreted the situation similarly if she had borne him daughters (Hess, 1999:20; Cooley, 1997: 149-150)? That Sita raises the sons within the natural environment is not considered suitable by Rama, who feels that sons must reside with their paternal line regardless of the fact that he has determined his wife to be of questionable chastity and virtue. On a political point, Sita is from the earth and perhaps represents a genre of people that exist closely with the soil, such as the *Dalits* (untouchables), and Rama's position as *raja* (royalty) is to control his environment, nature and his subjects.²⁶ Similarly with Shiva's sons, Kartekaya and Ganesha, who are born of the earth, water and dirt, respectively: it is towards their father that they gravitate in searching for a dominant male.

²⁴ The Hindu bride leaves her family to live with her in-laws where she occupies the lowest status within the household until she produces a son (Bennett, 1983b:270-275).

²⁵ The august Assembly utter when seeing Lava and Kusa, "These two boys are very much like Rama, like the very image of Rama" (Venkatesananda, 1988:401).

²⁶ The sage Vismamitra stated that, "Praiseworthy and non-praiseworthy actions may have to be done by a ruler for the protection of his subjects - even what appear to be unrighteous and sinful actions" (Venkatesananda, 1988:15).

In conclusion, the epic of Sita and Rama is disappointing in that the ideal promoted is an ideal female who never matures from her childhood innocence and purity. It becomes a social expectation that the female maintains this form of behaviour and intellectual oblivion often aided by the *Athena*-type characters such as mothers-in-law and elderly women who ensure conformity. Stagnation of self-determined female mentality accommodates such behaviour as venerable. Parvati complained of her treatment from Shiva, yet she always returned and supported him. The male, on the other hand, is expected to progress in every sphere; he is entitled to mature and develop personality and this is regarded as the paradigm of the male existence. The female who seeks similar goals is humiliated by society as obstinate and socially problematic. Curbed from realizing spiritual development and *moksha*, she is prevented from realizing maturity and psychological growth. Instead of following her husband meekly for years during which he is suspicious, non-appreciative and disdainful, Sita matures, concluding that she must break free from the cycle of suspicion and punishment. It is Rama that continues to behave as a child, demanding constant proof of love and devotion. It is he who is selfish and unyielding in his behaviour and intolerance. Sita demonstrates to the audience that although she has met the demands of her *dharma* and her society as the devotee to the god-husband, she concludes that the female should not accept a life that is not rewarded and appreciated. If constant devotion and reverence yields only harsh judgment and harassment, then for what reason is there desire and need for the female to persist in this direction? What is ignored in the literature is that Sita opted for a feminine environment that is not accessible to men and cannot be controlled and subjected by them. As Irigaray postulated, a woman who creates a divine space becomes the subject (Irigaray, 1984a:63). To create divine benevolence regarding female interaction, I would argue that Sita has employed Irigaray's notion of the mirror to reflect the subject as a goddess, giving her control to pursue self-determination.

5.2 SOCIAL REALITY

In Hindu sacred literature the senior wife is considered in society to be inauspicious although she also commands respect as the first wife, often performing religious rites with her husband. Although the male is entitled to take another wife for whatever might

be his reason, the first wife is deemed responsible for this decision (Bennett, 1983a:220-228). It is therefore in her interest to ensure she gains respect from a junior wife and to complicate and create chaos in the relationship between her husband and his other wives. As a double-edged sword she must complicate the social environment in order to maintain her seniority and respectability in her house, yet for this she is considered inauspicious because she causes discord in the home (Leslie, 1989:125-126; Abraham, 1997:6; Rupal, 2001:1082-1084; Bennett, 1983a:252-254). Sisterhoods are clandestinely undermined so that the male becomes the central, powerful figure that forces women to compete. Similarly, with daughters and daughters-in-law, there is a lack of intimate understanding of each other's social reality and instead, there is competition for the affections of brothers and husbands, respectively. Irigaray noted that women simply perform the duties demanded by male-dominated society and are expected to sacrifice their happiness and goals for the benefit of husband, son and brother (Irigaray, 1985b:120). As was noted previously with regard to the goddesses in the divine realm, particularly Sati, Parvati and Sita, they were foremostly wives and subservient to the often selfish intentions of their husbands. Although they complained and sighed about their domestic situations, they never wavered in their support of their husbands.

In the Hindu maternal home the daughter is awarded more respect and sanctity from her parents and siblings than are her sisters-in-law. She is rewarded with the easiest chores and tasks and can complain of her in-laws, where she occupies the lowest status. In this regard, Irigaray would elaborate on the female's role as nurse (Irigaray, 1991:188-189). Those women that have occupied the serving, nurturing role first, guard against possible usurpers who would redirect attention from one nurse to another. In the maternal home the daughter takes on an *Athena*-role, where she supports and serves the male interests of the household, commanding respect above other resident females. Irigaray reiterated that an *Athena* shows no interest in one-on-one relationships with other women, nor is she interested in love; instead, she aids in maintaining a social structure that ensures female inferiority and submissiveness to the patriarchal society (Irigaray, 1980a:12-13). The sister commands more respect from her brothers than she receives from her husband, thus creating tension between herself and her sisters-in-law. It is believed that a sister protects her brother's life and his prosperity but the wife simply

lengthens his life and ensures his lineage. Yet brothers often feel that their widowed sister is a financial burden, for she does not contribute financially or to the maintenance of the household. Often it is only if the matriarch is alive that a daughter may return to her maternal home, and her father is entitled to refuse her refuge if she is widowed. As a female within the house she serves no kinship role other than as a reproductive vessel, although in the maternal home her status places her above her sisters-in-law but not equally with her brothers (Irigaray, 1993:4). Alternatively, if the parents are absent the responsibility falls to her brothers to accommodate their sisters and her dependents, which the sisters-in-law would understandably discourage, thus creating tension between the females within the family (Bennett, 1983a:242-245; Bennett, 1983b:270; Dalrymple, 1999b:50-51). This social reality can be supported by Irigaray's notion that the female (here the sister-in-law/wife) is a kidnapped victim who cannot complain of her position or of the kidnapper's treatment towards her and others (Irigaray, 1993:2).

The Hindu wife is considered problematic in the patriarchal bias of domestic tension between couples and the joint, extended family. As the lowest member of the family her opportunity to express her wishes and opinions is solely through her husband as she only attains respect and a voice once she possesses an adult son. As Irigaray would note, only the male is entitled to use language and communicate within the patriarchal domestic order (Irigaray, 1980a:16-17). Only through her sexuality is this wife able to interact with her husband and seek better support for herself and her children. Although tension exists between the son and his brothers under parental supervision, parental favouritism exacerbates sibling rivalry. Within a male-dominated environment such tensions, in terms of male camaraderie, cannot exist and the blame is attributed to female sexuality and responsibility (Bennett, 1983a:219; Flood, 1998:36-38; Choudhury, 1998:76). From the patriarchal standpoint, because women are denied access to the symbols, language and power of the male environment, it is considered impossible for men to undermine each other as they control and create the social environment. Instead, if there is a reluctance to maintain this order then it can only be the influence of an outside malevolent character, namely a woman (Irigaray, 1980a:17-19).

In order that men in the androcentric environment remove the influence of females from engagement with younger powerless women, they seek to validate their fears by

utilising divine texts that maintain male authority. As such, widowhood is considered the fault of the female; she erred in her previous life, committing sins such as disobeying her husband, or being neglectful of her devotion to and worship of him. As a result, she is deprived of him. Yet the issue requires another perspective, in that a widow who sought to be financially independent upon her husband's death would be the matriarch of her family and a central figure of power. The social environment dictates that the superior person determines the rules within the household, therefore granting a financially independent woman immense power and authority. In order to prevent widowed women from attaining such status the religious laws are used to curtail female mobility and independence (Leslie, 1989:98-100; Bennett, 1983b:268).

A patriarchal environment does not accommodate women who are not under the control of men; such women are considered threatening to the social order as they are without supervision, control and manipulation. These independent women have less androcentric monitoring than wives and daughters within their homes, and can thus engage in establishing benevolent female relationships. The socio-political environment uses the Hindu texts to prohibit women from engaging with one another, by constantly placing a male first, be it brother, husband or son. The woman is never at liberty to form female relationships, as she is constantly nursing male interests. Instead, when she is liberated from her husband, brothers and sons, she is suddenly considered a threat to the patriarchal structure, even after living her entire life in the shackles of veneration of and subservience to the male. There is still the fear that the woman will rebel and undermine the patriarchal order. A fear is placed within all women that independent women, that is any woman not under the control of male dominance, seek to destroy the interests of the environment that aims to protect women. The responsibility is now placed upon women to monitor other women and to prevent them from establishing orders that would undermine the patriarchal structure, a structure that claims to have female interests at heart. Although Hindu women realise that benevolent female relationships are important to the growth of women within their social environment, they are tied to the Hindu texts and deities that continually flaunt female submissiveness and tolerance as the determined and appropriate behaviour for women. As Irigaray claimed, it is impossible for women to seek a different social position within their societies, communities and families if they do

not entertain the notion of establishing new symbols and a language that defines the feminine (Irigaray, 1980a:16). The role of the mother is indeed the most important, for here women can engage with their daughters by introducing the new symbols and language and creating benevolent relationships that could develop into a parallel and autonomous, female symbolic order. With such direction women, too, can become sisters, as men have always been brothers.

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CHAPTER SIX: ANDROCENTRIC CONSTRUCTION AND INTERPRETATION OF SHI'ITE THOUGHT

6.1 MALE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE IMAMATE

The Shi'ite branch of Islam accommodates an androcentric interpretation of creation and maintenance, as for example, supported by Irigaray's notion that God is male and determines the survival and prominence of his male subjects - sons. Also, the language and symbols created are those that only desire male interpretation (Irigaray, 1984a:63-65). Yet in order that this androcentric foundation be maintained there is a need to co-opt the feminine, which Irigaray would interpret as the female guardianship of androcentric religious tradition (Irigaray, 1984a:63). The only female granted divine status within Shi'ite mythology is Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed. Although she has what can be interpreted as a natural birth, she is an *Athena* born from her father and dedicated to him and his power structure. Fatima determines the legacy of the Imams, eventually determining the role for all females, although no ordinary woman can imitate her. In Shi'ite mythology Fatima embodies the only divine Muslim female; although her sons Hassan and Hoseyn are divine, through the lineage of the Imamate, her daughter Zeinab is not. Fatima is the isolated female represented in the religious mythology; she is private, inhibited and lacks benevolent female relationships. Silently, she continually sacrifices happiness, wealth, health and female relationships for the maintenance of Shi'ite reality, but she receives nothing in return, as females are expected to be self-sacrificing in the development of androcentric reality (Irigaray, 1980a:15).

The patriarchal system of the *Ithna'ashuri* (Imami)²⁷ and Shi'ism centre around the development of the *ulema*. The *ulema* are groups of men arranged into a hieratic pyramid where age determines knowledge, respect, and ascendancy to the divine and association to the Imams. Sycophants and younger males vie for the attentions and benefits that

²⁷ Unlike Sunnism, Shi'ism focuses on the image of the Imam, who is the representative of God on earth. Unlike the concept of the *umma* (community) which is central to Sunni Islam, the Imam is the guide and conscience of Shi'ite Islam. The *Ithna'ashuri* is a branch of Shi'ism and follows the teachings of interpretations of the Twelve Imams.

come from association with *ayatollahs* (miraculous sign of God)²⁸ (Richard, 1996:82-84). Although men occupy subject status in Shi'ite social reality, they are not equal amongst themselves. Other than the social determinants of class and age, religious education remains the avenue to social and divine superiority. Within such a society where groups vie for power and recognition, those that seek an alternative to the socio-religious polity instigate a war between good and evil. Such social structures rely heavily on the implications of good and evil, where the establishment is divinely supported and opposition to the establishment is regarded as evil and negative (Allen, 1998:34-38). When the establishment proves the stronger, this is acknowledged as the will and support of the divine; if they lose, they are martyrs who will be in the company of the divine. As with the Imams, martyrs, in the religious sense, can only be male since the female falls within the realm of the evil and the suspicious. As such, only men are considered to contribute to the maintenance of Shi'ism, removing the female from her reproductive role, since the Imams are already created in the divine realm and not as earthly mortals. Here God is undeniably an androcentric entity where the significance of the womb and female fertility has been displaced. Instead the Imams dwell within the divine and manifest on earth fully conscious of their purpose, as representatives of God.

The fundamental structure of *Ithna'ashuri* is that of the Imamate, a divine position held by the guide on earth who protects (man)kind from perdition. It is stated that God sent the Prophets, the last being Mohammed, who was succeeded by guarantors of the Islamic community, namely the Imams. Representing God on earth, they are mediators between man and the divine. In *Ithna'ashuri* there are twelve Imams, but the last Imam is believed to remain hidden until the dawn of the Golden Age. Throughout this development of the spiritual, male genealogy, no female is granted credence within Shi'ite spiritual growth, other than Fatima and Zeinab. They are venerated not for their literary or enlightened contribution to the development of social reality, but instead, they are admired for the sacrifices they made for the androcentric establishment and the disdain they received from communities. Irigaray proposed that women are never offered

²⁸ *Ayatollahs* are high ranking *ulema*, those educated in various religious and philosophical disciplines who instruct students in *Qur'an* interpretations and sayings of the Imams.

protection within male-dominated society, yet their subservience and tolerance are interpreted as a 'bizarre construction of religious morality' (Irigaray, 1993:4).

The Imams (architects of the patriarchal environment) prescribe the manner in which the communities are led but the orientation and roles of the female are to be determined and controlled by the male subject. Although dictatorial in appearance, the divinity bestowed upon the Imamate implies that such authority is legitimate, according to God, and that no female may enter and determine the religious history and orientation of Shi'ism. The development of female genesis in Shi'ism is reliant on the sole figure of Fatima, part of the fourteen *ma'sumin*.²⁹ Her position and relationship with her father has generated a subject-object relationship that has aided in defining an androcentric Shi'ite social reality, which Irigaray would perceive as the development of the virgin goddess, obedient to her father and his laws (Irigaray, 1980a:13). As such, Fatima's actions become the prescribed position for all mortal females; her actions and self-determinism are considered symbolically significant, because she sacrifices herself for the maintenance and progression of the patriarchal environment and her behaviour is therefore transferred onto the social orientation of women in Shi'ite society (Richard, 1995:6-7; Tabataba'i, 1989:183).

Shi'ism is primarily concerned with venerating the dead, which is exemplified by the shrines, mausoleums and prayers in respect to specific individuals. Theologians advise believers to visit the tombs of the *ziyara* (saints), specifically those of the Imams. Other pilgrimage sites include the tombs and mausoleums of women related to the Imams (Richard, 1995:9-11; Shahrastani, 1984:129-131). Unlike the men in their families, these women only receive veneration, once dead, if they died serving the interests of their male relatives and sought nothing in return other than to maintain a power structure from which they were excluded. The popularity of these women lay not only with their personal sacrifices but also with their surrender of any opportunities to develop benevolent female relationships, or so the androcentric literature implies.

Shi'ism makes a cult of death and martyrdom; there is great devotion to symbolic figures who meet torturous and violent ends. For Shi'ites, saintliness and holiness is

²⁹ The *ma'sumin* are the fourteen infallible or sinless icons in Shi'ite mythology (at-Tabarsi, 1986:2-4).

associated with martyrdom, tragedy and death. The enactment of tragedy is a male preserve maintaining the concepts of honour and integrity that are central to the ideology of the belief system. The mausoleums and sites of pilgrimage emphasize the importance and veneration of the dead and the constant search for guiding persons (*ershad*) (Tabataba'i, 1989:174; Shahrastani, 1984:128). The annual celebration of Ashura³⁰ is one such attempt to invoke the personal pain of the violent confrontation between the third Imam (Hoseyn) and the Iraqi enemy at Karbala and highlights the battle between good and evil, as previously mentioned, as well as the violence and blood.³¹ Passionate believers perform acts of flagellation, bludgeoning their heads and performing the whirling dance of the *taziya*; blood is symbolic in venerating the event and, significantly, it is the blood of men that is spilled, not that of women. This act signifies paradox and the *taziya*, exclusively performed by men for women, arouses the tensions that exist between the sexes. Blood plays an important role in the ideology, like the event of Ashura, for it is the purest blood that is shed, not that of women, which is polluted during sex and childbirth. As such, it is important to note why Zeinab was not slain at Karbala. Zeinab had to survive in order to keep the message of her brother, Hoseyn, alive, and as Irigaray would suggest, she became the guardian of the belief system (Irigaray, 1984a:63). As such Zeinab did not pollute the scene with her blood, allowing the men to realise a righteous death.

There are stark differences between and elaborations of roles, positions and divine aspirations for both sexes within Shi'ism. In the construction of the male-dominated socio-political environment it can be noted that there is a lack of benevolent female relationships. In the political development of the religion, where the concept of the Imamate has excluded female participation, such marginalizing tactics continue to be

³⁰ Ashura is a celebration that marks the martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn, his family and companions. (Richard, 1995: 103)

³¹ This would later become a re-enactment in the form of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-8). Ayatollah Khomeini utilised the images of the events at Karbala, particularly the characters of Imam Hoseyn and Yazid, to portray the rulers of each state Iran and Iraq, respectively. As such, those that perished in the war were considered martyrs as the Imam, his family and his followers were (Richard, 1995:86-89).

employed in the contemporary social reality for women, as those scholars who are instructed along androcentric lines continue to interpret the literature in a manner that eliminates the feminine from Shi'ite religious development (Najmabadi, 1998:61-62; Keddie, 2000:411-413; Iwai, 1985:23-25). Since women have been refused political and religious access, they have been unable to reinterpret or offer alternative interpretations of the feminine within Shi'ite mythology. The male interpretation claims legitimacy by divine right and consequently the social roles for both genders are specifically determined as morally sound. As such, male-dominated society is assumed to possess the right to deny women access to interpretation of mythology. Instead, women are marginalized and are represented in Shi'ite myth in a subservient and submissive manner, serving and supporting the male. Here Irigaray's notion of the nursing female comes to mind, the woman who nurses the male to the detriment of her own happiness and ambitions (Irigaray, 1991:110). Where women do participate in the development of Shi'ite mythology, it is in the role of nurse or as the *Athena* who discourages younger females from actively participating in the development of civilization. A woman can develop intimate roles with her male relatives, but much less so with other females (Irigaray, 1980a:16).

6.2 THE SUBJECTED FEMININE IN SHI'ITE MYTHOLOGY

Fatima was born into a social environment that denied the female access to or any form of self-identity. The female was always acknowledged as the daughter, wife or sister of the male and never as an identifiable, self-determined individual. Instead, women were enslaved in their homes and, in their minds, constantly reminded that they were an unwelcome but somehow tolerated entity within society.

He hides himself from the people of the evil for the tidings given him. Should he keep her with disgrace or bury her alive in the dust? Behold evil is what they decide. (*Qur'an* 16:59, see Shariati, 1980:108)

According to many feminist theorists, the social, normative ideal of patriarchy wants the female is to be invisible and mute (Anderson, 1998:99; Cooley, 1997:139-140). Female sexual identity is constructed in terms of a male-dominated environment that determines which feminine aspects will be accommodated or which will be ignored and discarded (Anderson, 1998:102-103; Cooley, 1997:141). For Irigaray, patriarchal and androcentric society considers female sexuality as dangerous and perilous to the socio-political structure; women encompass the passion and lust that might lead men to challenge and undermine the patriarchy (Irigaray, 1991:153-155). Female sexuality needs constant supervision and monitoring or it will undermine civilisation and subvert male creation. If the female is not supervised and contained, according to patriarchy, social values will decay and female desire will hypnotize men into self-destructive patterns. As such, it is best that the female sacrifice her being and her emotive and disruptive nature, to permit patriarchal interests to control and violently suppress female initiatives (Irigaray, 1984b:56-58).

According to Irigaray, male authority restricts the woman to role of mother; regardless of the fact that she is a wife, she remains a mother to the husband and his progeny. Female children are considered her progeny and her responsibility; it is to the man's credit if a son is born, but the woman's responsibility if it is a daughter. Irigaray claimed that because the male children belong to the father, the mother must nurse all males, her father, her sons and their male identity (Irigaray, 1991:185). Although Fatima is touted as the perfect mother in Shi'ite mythology there is little emphasis on her relationship with her daughters or her mother, Khadija. Her mother's early death disconnects Fatima from developing a benevolent mother-daughter relationship and she is forced into her father's social realm where he is the only parent shaping her into an *Athena* (Irigaray, 1980a:16). She is then venerated by the male-dominated society, as she becomes her father, Mohammed's nurse and mother. Symbolically, it can be inferred that she produces sons for her father/prophet by continuing to nurse all men in the androcentric environment in which she lived.

Apart from the appearance of the only divine female, Fatima, Shi'ite mythological development was determined by the male legacy of the Imams. The origins of the Imams are purely divine and celestial in orientation; they are perfect manifestations of divinity

and are leaders of their communities. Although they are representative of God on earth, it appears that God does not want females to represent him in the role as Imam. Although Fatima is considered divine, she is not credited with having contributed to the development of Shi'ite mythology and society in any socio-political manner, other than to prescribe a submissive and silent position for women. In addition to the absence of women in the development of Shi'ite myth, there is also a lack of sexuality. The events of Ashura offer insight into the androcentric interpretation of the female and the meaning of sexuality. The mythological orientation is purely around the heroic male, where Hoseyn is decapitated while holding his hemorrhaging infant son (Richard, 1996:98-100; Ayati, 2001:10-12). His brother Qasem³² and his bride are slain on their wedding day before consummating their marriage, highlighting the symbolic significance of purity and virginity in the myths. Eliade noted that a male-dominated society strives to defend certain symbols that best demonstrate its values and morality (Allen, 1998: 23-25; Eliade, 1991:67-72) and as such the androcentric interpretation of this event points to the self-sacrificing acts of the believing males. Outnumbered, the Imam and his followers elected to die defending the divine message, and much of the mythology is relayed through the dramatisation of the events such as the decapitation, bayoneting, lancing of the followers, romanticising the notion of the martyr. The event highlights not only the violence but also the latent sexuality symbolised in the blood. The other Imams are said to have been poisoned (Richard, 1995:102; Tabataba'i, 1989:197) but the death of Hoseyn is prominent because of his dramatic martyrdom and the romanticization that occurs with blood. Blood is shed in death but also with the first act of sex; however, the androcentric interpretation of *Ashura* refuses to accommodate blood that is spilled in the latter, emphasising mortality regarding women, but it venerates the blood spilled by men as representative of immortality and perfection. With the breaking of the hymen the girl becomes a woman, tying her to reproduction and earthly life, but male bloodshed is fatal. The mythology refuses to accommodate such contrasts, instead sacrificing consummation in order to realise perfection in death. Those of Hoseyn's family that perished with him were therefore pure and passionate. Another interesting development is that a female was

³² Qasem is the son of Ali but not of Fatima. After her death, Ali married several women who bore him children (Qummi, 2001:92).

not entitled to have her blood shed so that she too becomes a martyr, pure and divinely acceptable. Instead, women survived the battle at Karbala and were taken as prisoners. Although excluded from the battle and kept silent and separate, they were now expected to defend the message of Hoseyn and sacrifice themselves in order to relay his socio-religious message.

The mythology refuses to accommodate the women in death alongside their husbands and instead they are forced to linger, suffering humiliation and contempt in defending the position of their spouses. So although these women cannot embrace the symbols of the Imam such as martyrdom, purity, divine connection and divine death, they are expected to promote and respect them.

6.3 FATIMA'S DEVELOPMENT IN SHI'ITE MYTHOLOGY

Fatima's position in relation to her male relatives in Shi'ite mythology is best understood in terms of *Ahl al-Bayt* (people of the house), which include all those descended from the Prophet Mohammed. Their actions and behaviour demonstrate to the believers their social positions within society, as individuals in the *Ahl al-Bayt* were perfect in demeanour and spirituality. According to scholars such as Fadlullah and Tabataba'i the positions of the *ma'sumin* are dictated by God and revealed by Mohammed. They are considered infallible, possessing knowledge and personality that is faultless and precise along with pure and virtuous social conduct (Fadlullah, 2002:2; Tabataba'i, 1989:174-176; Richard, 1995:15-20; Shahrastani, 1984:126-127). Fatima is the only female mentioned in the construction of the infallibles and is essentially represented and depicted in a position that does not accord similar merit to the imams. In the line of ascension she is spiritually and metaphorically at the head, although not for her divine superiority but rather in that she is considered to be the mother of all the Imams, including the 'mother of her father' (Fadlullah, 2000:16).

Fatima is presented as a mother to all, though most particularly to the Prophet, her father (Qummi, 2001:23-30; Ordoni, 1987:13-20; Richard, 1995:46-48). Scholars assume that she espouses the characteristics of what a wife, mother and daughter should be. She is self-sacrificing, attentive and subservient to her male relatives and not concerned with her personal interests. This is in itself problematic as certain authors such

as Mutahari and Ordoni imply that a woman lacks personal interests and ambitions. If, however, she possesses such intentions then she should simply forget them, choosing instead to serve and support her husband. For these interpreters the *imago* of the divine female represents the direction for the mortal female, such that in imitation of Fatima, women should sacrifice materialism and personal interests. Women are asked to sacrifice for the male environment, receiving nothing in return, as fulfillment of her duty (Irigaray, 1980a:15). Yet authors such as Mutahari, Ordoni and Fadlullah fail to see Fatima's independence and her resilience to remain in the public domain rather than the private, refusing to adhere to social pressure of female seclusion and deprivation. Although she loses her inheritance, she is testimony that women should inform themselves of their rights, as Fatima did, by reciting from the Qur'an daily, always aware of the Prophet's teachings and lessons.

Yet scholars ignore her emphasis on female strength; instead, she is considered the obedient daughter who strove to please her father (Ordoni, 1987:23; Qummi, 2001:34-37). Scholars, Fadlullah, Shahrastani and Mutahari place great emphasis on her frailty, concealing the fact that she was psychologically stronger than her husband, Ali, was. She articulates her arguments in a manner of knowledge and self-confidence that men often fail to portray (Fadlullah, 2002:3-4; Shariati, 1980:14-18; Shaaban, 1995:63). Fatima defined characteristics in her husband that he was unable to express, yet as Irigaray suggests, it is to benefit the male-defined reality, not her own (Irigaray, 1985b:121). In response the patriarchal society determines the roles for men and women, allowing the male access to symbols of bravado and independence, whereas the female is expected to support the male in her role as a devoted mother (Foucault, 1988:97-99). Because Fatima was frail, male-dominated Shi'ite society has utilised mythological characters to justify its social attitude and prejudice towards women such that all women are frail and need to be secluded and monitored by their husbands and other male relatives. Beyond the physical frailty, the woman is considered to be mentally frail, and therefore her judgement cannot be trusted and her independence cannot be granted.

According to the patriarchal structures, the female Shi'ite believer should tolerate poverty and hard work as Fatima had, in that she determined it to be her destiny (Fadlullah, 2000:84-86). Irigaray stated that the woman always sacrifices of herself in

order that male ambitions be realised (Irigaray, 1985b:108) and the society would ascertain that a woman who tolerates poverty and arduous labour is the suitable wife and mother. In contrast, men are permitted to accumulate wealth and beautiful women, and such behaviour is defended (Fadlullah, 2000:122-123; Tabataba'i, 1989:178). Certainly a male is entitled to have rich rewards, but if he does not possess financial wealth then he is expected to possess the symbols venerated by the male-defined environment. The female is expected, as Fatima did, to accept her spouse's poverty, yet succumb to his superiority as he embraces these symbols, as a position dictated by God and physically enacted by Fatima.

Fatima's subservience and obedience can be interpreted along two lines. Firstly, her position can be seen as that of the dutiful wife who obeys her father and husband, never questioning their reasoning. Secondly, her actions can also be regarded as the personal strength and determination she possessed. Aware of her social position within the male-dominated environment, she aided her father and her husband within her prescribed space, as described by Ordoni, Qummi and Shariati.

Fatima, a young girl, weak, moves step by step with her father through the streets full of hatred, within the Masjid al Haram under the taunts of curses, mockery, contempt and difficulties. Whenever he falls he becomes like a bird that has fallen out of the nest. Fatima throws herself upon her father. With all of her strength, she protects him. With her small, fine hands, she takes her hero into her arms. (Shariati, 1980:166)

With all the physical assaults and taunts that her father endures, she alone defends his honour and integrity, she alone approaches the crowds and covers her father with her body (Ordoni, 1987:34-36; Shariati, 1980:42-47; Qummi, 2001:26-28). Using Irigaray's notion that the female is the guardian of the religious establishment (Irigaray, 1984a:63), Fatima literally demonstrates her strength by defending her father's teachings and the *Qur'an*. She covers him in such a manner as if to create a stronger spine for the messenger so that he can continue to relay his words, aware of her presence. But she does not define the divine, nor does she define herself apart from her social attachment to her father (Irigaray, 1984a:69). Fatima provides the support structure not merely as the

daughter who is dutiful in subservience, but as the protector of the male symbol of religious identity with God. She confronts hostility and maintains her dignity and determination as she did defending her right to inherit the *Fadak*³³ and rescues her father from degradation and humiliation.

What is most appealing is that in an historical environment where the presence of women was detested and anguished over, her father accepted her help. He concedes before hostile groups that as a messenger of God he can accept psychological and physical help from a woman, particularly his daughter. Irigaray would suggest that the male commentators, such as the Shi'ite scholars, interpreted Fatima as a radiant mother, happiest when aiding her father and husband. Yet, why can her behaviour not be interpreted as being symbolic for her father? Here she is presenting herself as the protective symbol that Mohammed needed to relate to and identify with in his socio-political environment.

The Quareish clan often proclaimed that Mohammed lacked offspring as he had no male surviving children and he was considered 'cut off' from providing lineage and receiving social respect (Shariati, 1980:50-54; Qummi, 2001:12-13; at-Tabarsi, 1986:14-18). Yet it is his daughter, Fatima, who demonstrates to the male population that the female is capable of accomplishing similar feats to that of mandatory sons, and is not merely concerned with material assets.

She becomes a creature who is the slave of a man, the disgrace of her father, the toy of a man's sexual urges and the 'goal' or slave of the home of her husband. Finally, this creature always shakes her man's sense of honor because she is the highest form of shame and disgrace. (Shariati, 1980:107)

³³ Fadak was a village near Medina that was inhabited by Jews who refused to submit to Islam, eventually yielding to Mohammed, when he took possession of the village. Shi'ite scholars argue that the Prophet gave it to Fatima as part of her maintenance (Ordoni, 1987:258).

Where the female was considered purely a weak and worthless burden, married at an early age to become the property and responsibility of her in-laws, Fatima demonstrates a system that is contrary to this social norm and works equally successfully. She does not leave her father, her house stands alongside his and she maintains constant contact with her family and those of her husband. She provides her sons, the second and third Imams, Hassan and Hoseyn, with social contact and lineage of their maternal side as well as their paternal family.

Yet when presented with the argument as to the self-determination shown by Mohammed and Fatima, contrary to the social norms, scholars such as Ordoni, at-Tabarsi and Shariati respond that the family was divine and therefore different. These authors further claim that their true nature was to dwell in the celestial realm alongside God and if they sought to contradict social norms then they were entitled to do so (Shariati, 1980:184; at-Tabarsi, 1986:161; Ordoni, 1987:67-69). It should not be construed that Fatima's poverty and rejection of material needs are the self-sacrificing acts of a woman created from the divine, as authors claim, thus undermining the divinity of mortal women. Shariati illustrated that poverty formed the basis of Fatima's spiritual life, "Fatima, who had grown up in poverty and with hardships in the home of her father, now had come to the home of Ali, a home whose only decoration and furniture was love and poverty" (Shariati, 1980:147).

In other words, according to the interpreters, women are purely concerned with material assets and therefore cannot realize spiritually as successfully as Fatima had. Instead, her lack of material assets should be understood as a position presenting an opportunity for women from all social groups, including impoverished females, to determine their own paths and voice their grievances.

Much is made of the close relationship that existed between the Prophet and his daughter, particularly his affection towards her when he embarked on journeys. Irigaray noted that it is characteristic in religious literature for there to be close attachment between father-god and the daughter (Irigaray, 1980a:13), and so Fatima can be construed as the virgin goddess, born of her father, obedient to his laws, at the expense of her mother, Khadija, who died when Fatima was eight years old. She was the last person to receive him when he left and the first to receive him when he returned (Fadlullah,

2002:12); but moreover, it should be construed that he if he did not return from his journey he was leaving the responsibility to her to continue his legacy, since she thinks her father's thoughts and can be seen as being born from his brain and dedicated to his ambitions (Irigaray, 1980a:12-13). It is her responsibility to adhere to these social expectations that would otherwise be granted solely to the eldest male child in terms of primogeniture. Contrary to this practice, Mohammed hands responsibility over to his youngest daughter, Fatima, socially an unacceptable and scoffed at pursuit. Through this action the Prophet illustrates that it is possible for a woman to promote the interests of her family and community as any later Imam could.

For authors such as Tabataba'i and Bilgrami only the chosen twelve male Imams could direct the community, as only men could determine the best for their households and family. One is led to believe that because the female does not contribute financially then any interest she possesses can only be selfish and personal, implying that men possess no personal interests or desires (Fadlullah, 2002:13). Fatima adhered to the principle and not to personal interests, demonstrating that it is possible for a woman to participate in leadership, and if one considers that she died when she was twenty years old (Fadlullah, 2002:18) it is possible for a young woman to take cognizance of her socio-economic environment and self-determination.

Scholars have called Fatima 'truthful' and have interpreted this as Fatima's awareness of her need to fulfill her role of motherhood and subservience to her male relatives (Qummi, 2001:6-7; Rachnavard, 1987:13-16). However, I suggest that her 'truthfulness' defines her ability to tolerate and withstand the immense social discrimination, and often, physical assaults, that she and her father encountered. Yet Fatima proved more resilient than her father, Mohammed, demonstrating her independent thought and support for a belief system. Irigaray claims that it is the female who is the guardian of the belief system (Irigaray, 1984a: 63) and perhaps this makes sense of why Fatima is the stronger character. She is the foundation of the belief system that permits Mohammed to further his ambitions, for he is dependent upon her for physical and psychological support. Supporting her father was not her sole purpose, for although she

died young shortly after losing her inheritance,³⁴ she established norms for women unheard of in her lifetime. She presented women with the opportunity to be viewed as human beings that were more than simply pretty, domestic incubators. Her short life proved to women that they could inherit their fathers' assets, that they are individuals, and that their parents should remain an important factor in their lives after marriage.

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³⁴ The Shi'ite argument is that the Prophet, Mohammed, was prevented from writing his final testament (Shariati, 1980:170).

CHAPTER SEVEN: INTERPRETING THE SHI'ITE HEROINES, FATIMA AND ZEINAB

7.1 SHI'ITE AND SUNNI HEROINES, FATIMA AND A'ISHA

Fatima and A'isha are important characters in the development of Shi'ite theology. The Battle of Camel (Richard, 1995:18-19; Shariati, 1980:5-10) develops the position and the perception of the female in Shi'ite mythology. It is the first battle undertaken by Ali, Fatima's husband and the first Imam, against A'isha, the favourite and youngest wife of the Prophet, and the only virgin he married. A'isha was notorious for her strong confrontational nature and successfully competed in the male environment where ego was paramount, and women were considered the spoils of war, not comrades in battle. Several Shi'ite scholars claim that A'isha contributed to Ali's death by a Kharijite³⁵, although these events aided in establishing venerated characters and mortal villains in the Shi'ite tradition (Richard, 1995:19-20; Ordoni, 1987:189-190). As Shi'ite mythology is based on the life of Mohammed, Ali and Fatima, it is essential to manifest malevolent opposition when creating a religious tradition. The characters of A'isha and Abu Bakr are the malevolent opposition to Fatima and Ali, respectively, yet these two malevolent Shi'ite characters are Sunni Islam's benevolent heroes. However, A'isha and Abu Bakr are important characters within the Shi'ite tradition in order that Ali and Fatima can be portrayed as divine and immortal, as opposed to the two malevolent and mortal characters.

A'isha presents a contrasting picture to that of Fatima, in Shi'ite myth. A'isha is not part of the divine legacy as she is the daughter of Abu Bakr, the first caliph, not that of Mohammed; she never had children from the Prophet, another blight against her worth and divine integrity in patriarchal societies. Irigaray stated that there is no place in the

³⁵ Kharijism is considered the earliest religious sect in Islam, and adherents, Kharijites, consider only Abu Bakr and Umar, the first and second caliphs, to be the only legitimate appointees (<http://www.princeton.edu/kharijis.htm>). The Shi'ites reject Abu Bakr and Umar as legitimate successors to the Prophet, Mohammed.

patriarchal society and religious tradition for the ordinary woman who cannot procreate (Irigaray, 1984b:80). In contrast, Fatima is the daughter of the Prophet, married to the divine Ali and the mother of the future Imams (Ordoni, 1987:155-157; Qummi, 2001:10-12). Khadija, Fatima's mother, and Fatima share several personal characteristics that deem them favourable to Shi'ite mythology. Scholarly authors such as Fadlullah, Ordoni, Shariati and at-Tabarsi, refer to Khadijah and Fatima as 'mothers' in a greater sense than literally being one. Irigaray would emphasise that it is because women do not possess an active relationship and identity with the divine, that they are described and credited with being mothers (Irigaray, 1984a:67). Instead, Khadija and particularly Fatima are defined in terms of the only role that characterises and venerates women, rather than their personalities and strong relation to the male symbols of strength and bravery.

Similarly, as in Hindu mythology, both women, Khadija and Fatima, died before their husbands, symbolically stating as Irigaray has, that they sacrificed their lives as guardians of the religious tradition (Irigaray, 1993:5). Only after the death of their wives, did Mohammed and Ali seek other wives; during their marriages, neither Khadija or Fatima were subjected to polygamous relationships, although it was a very common social practice. After their deaths, both Mohammed and Ali sought new wives and engaged in polygamy, further demonstrating the purity and virtue of both women. In death, their husbands further elevated their wives by illustrating that a single woman could not replace her, that he needed several to match the character of one woman. Perhaps what can be deduced from this is that the men who establish belief systems and are therefore leaders, have to be portrayed as the ideal men who embrace the symbols of society. As such, a man of divine origin, disinterested in material assets and financial wealth, would seek a wife purely as a companion rather than seek kinship ties (O'Flaherty, 1980b:3-4; Nafizi, 1997:59-60; Murad, 1999: <http://www.iol.ie/>).

Irigaray reveals that religious belief systems do not elaborate on the mother-daughter relationship (Irigaray, 1993:3), and similarly, Fatima and Khadija do not establish such emotional interaction, as Khadija dies when Fatima is only eight years old. Khadija is believed to have said, "I am not crying for fear of death ... because every woman needs a friend on her wedding night to tell her secrets and help her ... Fatima is still very young and I fear she will be alone on her wedding night" (Shariati, 1980:131). This

demonstrates that she and Fatima would never develop the mother-daughter bond that could establish a feminine divine. As such, the mother-daughter relationship is not emphasised in Shi'ite Islam and women, as Irigaray would claim, are there to be subservient nurses to their men (Irigaray, 1991:120). Further, it can be interpreted that Khadija loses her daughter to her father, as Irigaray illuminates with regard to the original matricide (Irigaray, 1980a:9-10).

Instead, with Khadija's death, Mohammed commits to several marriages and a young girl, A'isha, becomes one of Fatima's stepmothers. Although, according to Shi'ite scholars, Mohammed proposed to several women,³⁶ there is no mention of Fatima's interaction with them; yet, the animosity between her and A'isha is highlighted. Despite their similar ages, no friendship or sisterhood develops between them. Their lack of social engagement demonstrates the divide between good and evil, the divine and mortal, in Shi'ite myth. Although it can be interpreted as a possible sisterhood, it is literally a failed mother-daughter relationship, as discussed by Irigaray.

Instead of a benevolent friendship or sisterhood, there is animosity and rivalry, though Shi'ite scholars, Fadlullah, Ordoni and at-Tabarsi, would imply that the hostility came solely from A'isha, as she envied Fatima and Mohammed's relationship (at-Tabarsi, 1986:174-176). Although the Prophet had several wives he depended solely upon his daughter, possibly creating tension between his wives and his daughter. Fatima does not develop emotional attachment to any of the Prophet's wives, and considering that he proposed to twenty-one women in his life it seems somehow far-fetched that his daughter was unable to relate to a single woman (at-Tabarsi, 1986:175). She is the *Athena* to her father, guarding his ideology, whereas his wives serve as the objects of the sympathy of the Prophet. His wives are human manifestations of his attachment to socio-political symbols, such that his concern for maintaining family units, kinship, financial wealth and bravery are demonstrated in the women that he selected as wives. Although all his wives can serve as his mother and nurse, Mohammed transfers this role to his daughter. However, at-Tabarsi does not even allow the wives to develop their sexual identity because Fatima claims that identity as the nurse who does not desire.

³⁶ Mohammed married twelve women with whom he consecrated the marriages; he also proposed to several other women (at-Tabarsi, 1986:166-168).

We were told that our forefathers said that the Messenger of Allah often indulged in kissing the mouth of Fatima the mistress of the women of the world, so that A'isha finally protested He [Mohammed] answered ... 'when I yearn for Paradise, I kiss her and place my tongue in her mouth for I find in her the fragrance of Paradise. Fatima is thus a celestial human being.' (at - Tabarsi, 1986:177)

In this manner Fatima denied the wives the ability to satisfy Mohammed and granted him the ability to feel greater emotion than any mundane woman could provide.

The Shi'ite scholars do not mention any rivalry within the Prophet's household, but the patriarchal obsession with youthful female sexuality should be noted.

Fatima is a martyr; her father's death brought immense pain and inner turmoil to her, so that the pressure on her heart caused her eyes to bleed (Shariati, 1980:194). No one could thus suffer the way she did and there is no allusion to the fact that his widows mourned his loss. After Mohammed dies, the wives are removed from Shi'ite myth, their identities disintegrating with the physical body of the Prophet; their emotional suffering and financial destitution are ignored. Within a patriarchal social environment the death of the male is mourned by other males; the females, however, are not entitled to display their grief nor is it acknowledged (Korte, 1994:75-78; Minces, 1982:35-39; Nafizi, 1997:65-69). In moments of sorrow, surely women seek emotional comfort from other women? Certainly a sisterhood is created in which women bond and share, becoming a closed social unit where males cannot venture and intrude. So how can this simply be disregarded in the development of social relations?

Fatima grieves alone; other than A'isha, there are no women of similar age, yet hostility and tension increases between them and is greatest after Mohammed's death. In a moment of sorrow, when sympathy is greatest between them, A'isha and Fatima remain poles apart. Fatima cannot even grieve with her daughters, because they are too young. The female burdens herself with grief, suppresses it and is eventually consumed by it; her pain and her inability to communicate her pain ultimately lead to madness, such that she bleeds from her eyes. Fatima claws at the earth, she cries and laments at her father's grave cursing her loss, the *Athena* that has lost her father-god and cannot continue to

defend his ideology if he is no longer present. Her loss is even greater, for she is disappointed that Ali is denied the right to be the caliph through righteous claim, so she cannot continue to be the guardian of the religious tradition. As if invisible, she does not speak of her position as the Prophet's daughter, of her disappointment about not being able to continue as the *Athena* of Mohammed, or of her neglect by the society that has embraced the ideology of the Prophet (Shariati, 1980:187-190; Fadlullah, 2000:154; Mutahhari, 2001:65-67).

Behaving as if she no longer has a purpose, Fatima mourns her father, becoming depressed and withdrawn. Shi'ite scholars argue that Fatima was of celestial origin, hence her ability to determine her hour of death and prepare for it (Shariati, 1980:195). She asks to be buried with no grave marker, certainly implying that she joined her father, to continue serving him as a *houri* (heavenly virgins). According to Ordoni, Ali complies with Fatima's desire for a secret burial, yet it is never revealed why she felt it important that no one discover her grave (Ordoni, 1987:228). As a *houri* she would serve her father-god as a servant and nurse. Mohammed and Fatima are ritually cleansed by Ali (the Imam), the righteous caliphate who ritually purifies the bodies of the mother and father of Shi'ite Islam, relinquishing them both, ninety-five days apart (at-Tabarsi, 1986:178).

Fatima's life and her identity are beacons for the women of the Shi'ite faith. In the socio-political reality, wealthier women find it easier to pursue self-expression and self-determination than women who are curtailed through poverty and ignorance. Poorer women tend to be more oppressed, denied and abused in comparison to their wealthier counterparts, and are less likely to address the self-determining aspects that Fatima embraced, regardless of the fact that she, Fatima, was raised in poverty and socially marginalised. Rather than the Shi'ite literature stating that Fatima spoke for all women, her physical reality depicted a woman who accommodated her poverty. She certainly did not like being poor, as Shariati points out:

One day like any other day, the Prophet enters Fatima's home. His eye falls upon a patterned curtain. He frowns, says nothing and leaves. Fatima senses it. She knows what her sin is. She also knows

what repentance is. (Shariati, 1980:141)

But Fatima demonstrated to poor women, particularly, that it was possible for them to proceed spiritually and socially, through self-determination just as the Prophet and she had done (Mutahhari, 2001:12-18; Al Quazwini and Saleh, 2001:25-32).

Aside from her poverty, she was also frail and sickly. Although of dubious health, Fatima was determined to maintain a hold on the *Fadak*, displaying strength in promoting her self-interest, although it can be argued that she sought it to provide for her two male children, Hassan and Hoseyn, rather than for herself. Such sacrifices remain somewhat problematic for the contemporary woman who struggles to assert herself in terms of identity and economic independence, rather than simply benefiting the men in her family. In relating the life of Fatima, it appears that she sacrifices her all, offering her wellbeing and acting in a supportive capacity for her weaker men, Mohammed and Ali. This well reflects Irigaray and Murad's claims that regardless of the mental strength of the woman, she cannot occupy centre stage in constructing a religious tradition, simply because she does not have a female god with which to identify (Irigaray, 1984a:63; Murad, 1999:<http://www.ie>). She has no symbols to which she can relate and therefore cannot seek recognition on the same level as the male who already controls the language and the symbolic construction of the socio-political reality. The existing symbols allocated to females, those of subservience, compassion and self-sacrifice, have created a divine female, such as Fatima, for believing Shi'ite women to imitate in defining themselves. Such limitation and restriction in developing self-identity is problematic in that women are denied self-expression and true identity; instead, they are being compartmentalised according to patriarchal, androcentric language and symbols that women cannot understand (Allen, 1998:180-181; Eliade, 1991:82-84; Foucault, 2000:139-145; Keddie, 2000:409-412).

Fatima represents the strength that the male characters could never be, yet she is portrayed as the self-sacrificing character, and as Irigaray claimed, even though she can be considered the guardian of the Shi'ite tradition, she never benefits, she only suffers silently. Without her self-sacrifice and determination, the new ideologies could not survive; where the male fails to be the heroic warrior, it is the female who must muster

the psychological strength to pursue her own identity for the benefit of her men. Although Shi'ite literature by Ordoni, Fadlullah, at-Tabarsi and Shariati, elaborate the battles undertaken by Mohammed and Ali, enacting the male symbols of power and bravery, they do not possess the psychological strength and eloquent oration of Fatima. Because this might be seen as a flaw in Mohammed and Ali, Fatima has to use her ability to strengthen their positions by promoting their ideology rather than creating a position that promotes her own gender. Instead, she foregoes her opportunity and allows the men to benefit from her actions and to receive the credit, receding to the background and allowing them to bask in the glory. Although Shi'ite scholars maintain that Fatima espouses the notions that all Shi'ite women should embrace, based on two reasons, I believe that Fatima should not be considered the sole icon for women's interests: firstly, she defends the position dictated by the patriarchal social reality and secondly, she defines the female as purely a mother-type to her father, husband and sons, thus relinquishing personal power and happiness.

A'isha, on the other hand, epitomises the archetypal and problematic female character in Shi'ite tradition, portrayed as troublesome, attention-seeking, jealous and loathsome. Shi'ite scholarship refuses to credit A'isha with several facts: firstly, she was the favourite and youngest wife of Mohammed; secondly, she possessed great religious knowledge to the extent that she was responsible for disseminating Mohammed's teachings after his death; and thirdly, she is disregarded in the annals of Shi'ite myth (Shaaban, 1995:63). Instead, Fatima is venerated as the 'All-Pure', loyal, obedient wife and devoted mother who silently sacrifices her being for the benefit of men and their ideology. A'isha certainly never suffered in silence, regularly challenging the Prophet, Mohammed, particularly with regard to his practice of polygamy. "It seems to me that your Lord makes haste to satisfy your desires" (cited in Brooks, 1995:83). However, the challenges with which she confronted the Prophet were matched by Ali and Fatima's enmity toward A'isha, who wished for Mohammed to divorce her, aiming to sever the kinship tie with her father, Abu Bakr, Mohammed's lieutenant and eventual successor. Such an opportunity arose when A'isha, accidentally left in the desert, returned home in the company of a young stranger. This happened at a time when the relationship between Mohammed and A'isha was strained, and so the Prophet asked others of her character, to

which all but one supported A'isha, namely Ali, who was rumoured to have said to Mohammed, "Women are plentiful, you can always change one for another" (Goodwin, 1995:40).

Ali, the first Imam and Fatima's husband, demonstrates an example of how Shi'ite myth developed the chastity and purity of Fatima, but the immorality and dishonesty of A'isha, in a context of male-constructed reality. A'isha's independent nature is not admired by the Shi'ite scholar because her character is viewed as chaotic and threatening to the social order and expected submission of women. In contrast, Fatima, possessed strong character but used it to benefit her male relatives and male-dominant environment, and was therefore venerated as the nurse, mother and self-sacrificing woman.

Demonstrating Irigaray's claim that the female continually gives birth (1980a: 15), Fatima had four children and died whilst giving birth to her fifth child, a son, at twenty years of age (Fadlullah, 2000:18). Fatima is the guardian of the flesh (Irigaray, 1980a:19), as she assured the male lineage of Imams, sacrificing her life in order to promote this divine ideology; she dies as tradition would present her, in the radiant glorification of motherhood. Although Fatima could not create the symbolic discourse of the Shi'ite tradition nor disseminate the messages and teachings, she was permitted to be the symbolic sacrificial object for the sake of growth and benevolence of Shi'ite society (Irigaray, 1984b:78-79). As a mother and the nurse, she exemplifies for women that their bodies and minds are to be sacrificed for the religious tradition, buried with the divine law, becoming a shadow and respecting the cult of the dead. Like Irigaray's notion of the mechanically urged woman (1985b:120), Fatima never expected reciprocity; she assumed it was her duty to be instructed by her husband and father, subservient and self-sacrificing to their ambitions. Amongst certain sects she is even claimed to have retained her virginity despite her motherhood (Richard, 1995:24; Qummi, 2001:123-125; Shahrastani, 1984:24-32), thus challenging the position of A'isha, who was the only virgin that Mohammed married. However, as a mortal, A'isha lost her virginity although she remained childless, whereas Fatima bore children. Osameh ibn Zeid asked Mohammed, "What is that which you are holding, Prophet of God?" The Prophet, while his face filled with delight and pleasure, pulled apart his cloak revealing Hasan and Hoseyn, said, "these are my two sons and the sons of my daughter" [Fatima] (Shariati, 1980:153). As

Mohammed was the father of Hassan and Hoseyn, making them divine, just as Fatima and Mohammed were.

In Shi'ite religious tradition Fatima served both roles to her father - mother and daughter - but she is also the 'mother' of all the divine men who are representations of God. As Irigaray claims, all women are mothers to men and to the social reality (Irigaray, 1985b:121). In the Shi'ite tradition, it was revealed to Fatima that the twelfth Imam would be named Mohammed and so she was named Mother of the Father (*omm abiha*) and the Radiant One (*Zahra*) (Fadlullah, 2000:9; at-Tabarsi, 1986: 176). Although mother to all the divine Imams, Fatima is the human *hour*i who maintains her virginity, does not menstruate, has no afterbirth and remains eternally youthful, in terms of how she is represented in Shi'ite mythology (Ordoni, 1987:140).

Because Fatima does not experience menstruation, she is not restricted from prayer as are other Shi'ite women and therefore she is never polluted and exposed to evil (Richard, 1995:25; Qummi, 2001:96-98). However, there are several hadith illustrating that A'isha menstruated: "the Prophet would lie back in my lap while I was having my period, and then he would recite the *Qur'an*" (*Al-Jami' al-sahih*, 1/179 see Awde, 2000:93). A'isha's menstruation aided in establishing her mortality, implying that menstruation is the catalyst to aging and death. Yet authors such as Ali Shari'ati insist that Fatima is the model that every woman should emulate, which seems impossible as no woman can retain youth, or be fertile and not menstruate (Shariati, 1980:26-30; Mutahhari, 2001:10-15; Najmabadi, 1998:63-68). Instead, Shi'ite authors base their arguments on Fatima's subservience and acceptance of poverty in not amassing material assets; in other words, women must not seek to enrich and empower themselves by using the symbols that define men in terms of power, prestige and status. The Prophet advised her to pray against such inclinations and to seek inner-strength, as daughter and confidante of her father - as the Prophet, wife and mother of the Imam, she was expected to be self-sacrificing in her role.

Shi'ite women are asked to imitate this archetype that lacks practicality for the normal woman; a mother who does not menstruate and retains her virginity. Fatima silently observes, never asking for anything, yet is available to support all her divine, male relations (Richard, 1995:25-26; at-Tabarsi, 1986:19-23). According to the Shi'ite

tradition, Fatima does not establish relationships with other females; she loses her mother and sisters, and dedicates herself to serving her father and husband. Drawing on Irigaray's theory about the mother-daughter relationship, it is clear that Fatima, the *Athena*, is denied the opportunity to establish a mother-daughter relationship either with her mother, Khadija, or with her daughters, Umm Kulthum and Zeinab. The Shi'ite woman must adhere to motherhood as her divine and natural role but she must produce sons; since girls are irrelevant, she submits to male issues, concerns and symbols (Birge, 1999:49-52). Fatima dies after having her third son, but rather than her son, a potential divine Imam, being held responsible for the death of his mother, he, too, dies. Instead, just as Irigaray implies that the woman sacrifices herself in completing her duty (1985b:120), Fatima produces the progeny for the continuance of the divine descendants and raises the leaders of the "Community", an undertaking that all Shi'ite women must observe.

According to patriarchal tradition, menstruating women are inflected with an evil spirit; though this is not to say that the woman is primarily an evil creature, it does imply that an essential evil exists that is part of her nature, because of this blood; as such, the person associating with her is polluted through that association (Noddings, 1989:37; O'Flaherty, 1980b: 5-7; Shaaban, 1995:68; Nafizi, 1997:60-63). For the male-dominated society, menstruation is a manifestation of evil in the universe, and therefore enormous power is inherent in the blood. Feminist scholar of religion, Carol Christ, and Irigaray, elaborate that religion centres on the worship of a male God, and due to notions of female pollution, women cannot participate fully in the belief structure and religious practices. Instead, they are dependent on and subservient to androcentric religious interpretation and male authority that legitimises the socio-political authority of fathers, husbands and sons (Christ, cited in Noddings, 1989:65; Irigaray, 1984b:80).

Mohammed is believed to have said in the *Musnad* of the eighth Imam that Fatima did not suffer as other women do; she did not menstruate nor did she remain bedridden after childbirth (at-Tabarsi, 1986:174-175; Ordoni, 1987:121-123). This blood excludes women from prayer and entry to mosques, particularly those in Mecca, the birthplace of Islam; but Fatima could and did pray continuously, therefore avoiding pollution and remaining eternally pure. As such, God created Fatima to characterise moral excellence

along with a high level of divinity (Ordoni, 1987:10; 44). Although, amongst Shi'ite scholars, Mohammed is promoted as an ordinary man relaying a divine message, his daughter is characterised with the qualities of a celestial being and as a virgin goddess. The patriarchal environment will not tolerate an ideology that places an ordinary woman as the 'mother' of the religious tradition, in that she has reproduced the men who will construct the symbolic reality. As such, great divine men cannot be born from the dark womb of a mortal, ordinary woman, and so she must be re-created as part of the divine and as different from the ordinary female.

By elevating Fatima to a celestial level, no woman can truly imitate her and therefore she is excluded from participating, contributing and interacting with the religious tradition; she remains a silent spectator. Instead, ordinary women are threatened with the perfect imagery of Fatima and manipulated into reenacting her lifestyle, yet concurrently are reminded that they can never replicate her image. Shi'ite literature suggests that God prepared Fatima for her hardship and oppression, that she was prepared to exist under these circumstances. Consequently, mortal women must accommodate their social predicaments and envision Fatima's position, accepting that God has determined it as such (Ordoni, 1987:108; Mutahhari, 2001:98-102; Iwai, 1985:54-56; Shariati, 1980:120). Touted as the perfect *imago* of wife, mother and daughter, all relationship constructions mimic Fatima in relation to her male relatives, never to her female relatives. Fatima is portrayed as celestially superior to Mohammed, although this is to illustrate his perfection as the messenger of God, rather than her as a divine woman. Regardless of these virtuous attributes bestowed upon the divine feminine, Fatima, no women, including Fatima herself, are entitled to be messengers (Prophets) or representations of God (Imams). As Irigaray would argue, women do not possess a God and are thus forced to comply with male perceptions of an ideal type that must meet male needs and ambitions but offer the woman little satisfaction (Irigaray, 1984a:64). Fatima demonstrates to Shi'ite women that there is no divinity for women, no sisterhood of communication and no matrilineal lineage that can create a mirror for women. Instead, Shi'ite women are presented with an image that, as Irigaray stated, reduces Fatima to an exterior symbol, devoid of female interaction and signifying an inability to define herself without the need to attach her

existence to a male relative. Prevented from determining her own social environment, she cannot aspire to subjectivity, but merely accepts her relegation to an object status.

7.2 ZEINAB

Ali is said to have asked Fatima, "Who is the best amongst women?" to which she replied that "...those that do not see men nor are men seen by them" (cited in Bilgrami, 1986:5). This claim has been used to validate the isolation and submission expected of Shi'ite women, but it is also used by Shi'ite scholars when speaking and writing of Fatima's daughter, Zeinab. Like the relationship between Fatima and Khadija, Zeinab too, loses her mother, Fatima, at a young age but she is expected to support her brother, Hoseyn, as her mother supported her father, Mohammed. The mother-daughter relationship is never developed, apart from in relation to Fatima's death; Zeinab is not part of the celestial family in which her mother is the only female. Instead, she and her sister, Umm Kulthum, are the only persons in her family, of her father, Ali, and her brothers, Hassan and Hoseyn, not to be considered representative of or acquainted with God. Throughout her life, Zeinab is reminded of the responsibility she has to her brother, Hoseyn, and that she is the guardian of his person and ideology. Like her mother who supported her father, Mohammed, in times of his humiliation and weakness, so Zeinab supported Hoseyn in his attempt to demonstrate the religious ideology, rather allowing herself to be humiliated.

Shi'ite scholars, Bilgrami and al-Faruqi, regard Zeinab as a pious woman, silent in her existence as wife and mother, but vocal as the sister of Hoseyn, the third Imam. One encounters Zeinab in Shi'ite literature simply because she is the only adult survivor of the Prophet's family after her brother, Hoseyn, is murdered and his heir is but a child. However, Zeinab is reminded, even as a child, by her mother and father, of her responsibility to her brother, Hoseyn. This well illustrates Irigaray's claim that it is the responsibility of the female in patriarchy, to ensure that the male's goals are realised, and that she should sacrifice herself in order that his ambitions be realised (Irigaray, 1984b:78). Zeinab asks:

"If I leave him [Hoseyn] now, how shall I be able to

face my mother, who at the time of her death had willed, 'Zeinab, after me you are both mother and sister for Husayn [a.s.]'? It is obligatory for me to stay with you [Abdullah - husband], but if I do not go with him at this time, I shall not be able to bear the separation." (cited in Bilgrami, 1986:15)

Although her mother, Fatima, suffers as the guardian of her grandfather's, Mohammed's, ambitions, Fatima, as an *Athena*, instructs Zeinab to realise her responsibilities to the father-god, and to be dedicated to service of the Imams, namely, her brother, Hoseyn. However, Zeinab cannot be an *Athena*; she is not a virgin goddess but merely a mortal woman. Her brother, Hoseyn, severs the bond that Fatima and Zeinab could develop, in order to prevent Zeinab from becoming the guardian of her mother's ideals and personal aspirations. As such Zeinab becomes the extension of Fatima's self-sacrificing nature and Irigaray states that it is impossible for a woman, say Zeinab, to love anyone other than the male interest she is expected to protect and serve (Whitford, 1991b:79-81). Zeinab is therefore unable to approach her mother for love and adoration, as her mother is an ally of patriarchy, and would demand that the male-constructed symbols be defended and venerated.

Zeinab's position in her divine family is diametrically revealed in the event at Karbala, Iraq, where Hoseyn is invited to Baghdad, is ambushed by Yazid and murdered.³⁷ Zeinab is presented as the middle-aged, married mother, often a position that commands respect and a degree of autonomy and independence in Islamic society (Bilgrami, 1986:38). It is considered that when a woman is past her youth, has fulfilled her role as a mother, then she is entitled to pursue interests outside the family and walk unaccompanied even at night. Yet the relationship between Zeinab and Hoseyn highlights the issue that the female must always be subservient to the ideologies and ambitions of men, regardless of the fact that she is of the age where she has autonomy and independence. As such, older Shi'ite women should concern themselves with aiding their brothers' families rather than seek to establish female benevolent relationships or economic independence. Her age also places her as opposite to her mother, Fatima, in

³⁷ For a detailed account of the events at Karbala, see Ayati, "A probe into the history of Ashura" (2001).

terms of divine, female youth and her position as a human *hourī*. Zeinab's mortality, apart from her family's divine position, signifies that in a patriarchal society, a girl possesses temporary status in her father's home and when she marries she becomes the responsibility of her husband's home. For that reason she receives minimal attention as she is seen to be benefiting another group rather than her maternal home (Goodwin, 1994:44). However, it is claimed by Shi'ite scholars that Mohammed instructed Ali that Zeinab would in adulthood protect Hoseyn from his enemies, and for that reason she maintained a deep emotional attachment to him and his ideology, becoming the guardian to his ideals.

After Hoseyn is martyred, Zeinab is captured and humiliated, although the women could not perish as martyrs, as there is no infinite existence for a woman in Shi'ite myth. Not possessing divinity, these surviving women could not experience their own subjectivity and so could not embrace the symbols of martyrdom and death. Instead, Zeinab, and the other surviving women and children, were spared in order to guard the religious tradition and to ensure its survival and to vocalise the injustice. So although Zeinab could not embrace the symbols and the language of martyrdom, she could physically and publicly suffer the humiliation, sparing her brother such a fate. Irigaray claims that the female must sacrifice herself so that the male ambitions can be realised (Irigaray, 1984b:78), and here Zeinab must survive as the guardian as well as to realise her brother's, Hoseyn's, goals. Although she is captured with other women, there is no construction of a benevolent sisterhood, or a communication of empathy and mutual suffering. Instead, Zeinab is steadfast in mourning the loss of her brother, wanting to sacrifice herself and her children for his ideals.

Zeinab brought to him [Hoseyn] her two sons and said to him, "O my brother, if women were permitted to fight I would have courted death to save you. But it is not allowed. Accept therefore the sacrifice of my two sons." (Bilgrami, 1986:18)

It is interesting to note that she would sacrifice her sons, and yet one does not hear of the daughters being sacrificed - is it possible that such a suggestion would be considered an insult to the position of the Imam? Another interesting point is that women are not

permitted to enter battle, therefore implying, as suggested by Irigaray, that women are not permitted to embrace the symbols or use the language of the religious tradition (Irigaray, 1984a: 64). Attacking and slandering Zeinab was an attack on the very institution of Shi'ite tradition that she represented; because she is relegated the bottom of the socio-political environment, it is she who suffers the degradation and humiliation while the male, who occupies the heavenly position, remains superior and ambitious (Irigaray, 1985b:108). In her suffering and humiliation she remained undefended as a fifty-year old woman (Bilgrami, 1986:20-24; Ayati, 2001:8-12).³⁸

Fatima's statement, that a good woman does not see men, is problematic as she accompanied her father and challenged Mohammed's followers when she wanted to claim the *Fadak*. As an *Athena*, according to Irigaray, she enforced the will of her father-god while controlling the movements of women, isolating and restricting them to the submissive positions within their homes (Irigaray, 1980a: 12-13). As a woman who personified psychological strength and divine origin, according to the Shi'ite scholars, Shariati, Fadlullah, Ordoni and Bilgrami, she reduces women to objects, removing them from the public sphere and silencing them in darkness and isolation. The divine, perfect 'mother' female is prescribing a muted role for mortal Shi'ite women and asking them to be the guardians of the male-dominated environment. In other words, Fatima wishes women to demonstrate their strength of character in order to defend the ideals and ambitions of their men, rather than for their personal benefit. If necessary, the woman is entitled to sacrifice her life, as Fatima and Khadija had, while supporting their husbands' goals, most particularly when his social reality is threatened. It seems that Zeinab is being utilised in the literature to espouse this position prescribed by the male audience, which is uncomfortable with any form of female freedom, regardless of age. But that same female strength can be channeled to defend male symbols. Patriarchal society desires a domestic female that is mute and submissive, but when the man is unable to defend his symbols and language, then she must defend what is perceived threatening to

³⁸ After her capture, she was always presented unveiled to the public, making it difficult for the believing Shi'ite woman to guard her modesty and hide her beauty (Bilgrami, 1986:2).

the righteous and divine in the male-ordered reality. Under exceptional circumstances, however, women are entitled to destroy chaos and the threat to patriarchal order.

It must be considered that the only redeeming quality that Zeinab's husband, Abdullah, could identify was that Zeinab was "a good housewife" (Bilgrami, 1986:8-10; Ayati, 2001:23-30; Fadlullah, 2000:124-125). The statement places women firmly in the domestic domain under the supervision of the male, silent and alienated from the socio-political domain. Zeinab was cloistered in a house; she never developed benevolent female relationship nor communication with other women, as she was constantly reminded of her duty to her brother, Hoseyn, and his divine cause rather than realising her own identity and happiness (Bilgrami, 1986: 15). Another interesting point is that Fatima blatantly favours her son, Hoseyn, over her daughter, who is younger than her brother. Fatima regards the nurturing and nursing as Zeinab's responsibility to her brother, for he has ideals and ambitions and it is vital that she be the willing participant in sacrificing her life and happiness for his aspirations. Yet, he, Hoseyn, is not asked by their mother to care for Zeinab's welfare. The Imams are the masters of the Shi'ite social environment, and as Zeinab can only be defined in terms of her brothers, it is therefore necessary that she defend the patriarchal religious tradition (Bilgrami, 1986:11).

Asking Zeinab to sacrifice her youth and life to the servitude and emotional comfort of Hoseyn is the role of the *Athena* (Bilgrami, 1986:15; Ayati, 2001:15-18; Keddie, 2000:407-409); although she has greater freedom of movement than the rest of the female populace, she aims to subordinate women to male authority. Instead, Zeinab is said, according to Ayati, to have educated Shi'ite women in the religious tradition, an occupation that paralleled her mother's role in educating and informing people of the Prophet's message (Ayati, 2001:26; Al-Quazwini and Saleh, 2001:32-33). Yet, Shi'ite scholars attempt to present a character that is separate from the social renaissance that her grandfather, Mohammed, and her mother created. She volunteers herself for men's ambitions in the male-constructed environment, in the form of Hoseyn, and when he refused, offers her sons instead, and herself:

When Ibn Ziyad ordered that Husayn should be killed,

Lady Zeinab said: "O son of Ziyad! If you want to kill him kill me along with him".

The Imam, however, said: "O son of Ziyad! Don't you know that being killed is our legacy and martyrdom is an honor for us. (Ayati, 2001:146)

Yet why is she so eager to sacrifice that which is essentially hers, and not expect any form of gratification or merit due to her stance? Zeinab is sacrificing herself because she is the guardian of the religious tradition; by wanting to die alongside Hoseyn, she would be sharing his symbols and language. However, he does not seek her bodily sacrifice for she is not part of the male-controlled tradition; instead he states that only the Imams revere the symbols of martyrdom and the language of death. Irigaray states that women are homeless in the symbolic order (Whitford, 1991b:69) and a woman who exists outside a form of socio-religious control must be humiliated and degraded, as happens to Zeinab, once her brother, the third Imam, is killed. Their capture and the journey between Kufa and Medina demonstrates a period where Zeinab leads the *Ahlul-Bayt* community, who are in this period in an Imam-less, liminal space, but she cannot offer spiritual leadership; as Irigaray would claim, it is her responsibility within this period to observe guardianship of the Shi'ite tradition (Ayati, 2001:112). After Hoseyn's death, according to Shi'ite scholars, Zeinab became *baakiyah* (one who always weeps), for his death means that Zeinab loses her identity and attachment to the divine family. Her depression is brought on by the knowledge that she guards a tradition situated in a leaderless vacuum, and she weeps because the symbols and the language of the Shi'ite community are in danger of being lost.

What little information exists of Zeinab, in Shi'ite literature, portrays her life in relation to that of Hoseyn and Fatima. Because Fatima had instructed Zeinab to be the mother and nurse of Hoseyn, she accompanies him to Karbala, leaving her husband, Abdullah, in order to protect the male tradition, a female position already explained by Irigaray. Her mother, Fatima, instructs her daughter, a role that can be defined, according to Irigaray, as that of the *Athena*, whereby Fatima dictates the social subservience and self-sacrifice of the mortal Shi'ite woman, Zeinab (Irigaray, 1980a: 12-13). Ironically, her self-sacrifice in leaving her husband, and her subservience to her brother's ambitions and ideals, do not accord her recognition as part of the divine, but rather relegates her to a subordinate position; here, she is invisible to the architects of the religious tradition, that

is her grandfather, father and brothers, and yet she forms an intrinsic part in maintaining and sustaining their ideals and ambitions. From the point of view of interpretations by Shi'ite scholars, there is a lack of development of female benevolent relationship between Fatima and Zeinab; since Fatima plays the role as an *Athena*, there is no interest or time to establish a sisterhood of communication, because that time should be utilised in defending and supporting the ambitions of the father-god.

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CHAPTER EIGHT: THE LACK OF BENEVOLENT RELATIONSHIPS IN SHI'ITE MYTHOLOGY AND SOCIAL REALITY

8.1 MYTHOLOGY

Other than Fatima, no other female contributed to the divine nor to the development of the Shi'ite religious tradition. The cult of death is only concerned with male legacy and male contribution. The females Fatima and Zeinab are seen as contributory factors in the deaths and births of the Imams. However, the characters of Fatima and Zeinab differ essentially in that Fatima is *aeiparthenos* (young permanent virgin) whereas Zeinab is characterised as the middle-aged, married and emotional female. When Mohammed ate the fruit given by Gabriel, Khadijah gave birth to Fatima; her name is said to be given by God and thus links her to the divine realm of Shi'ite tradition (Shariati, 1980:8-9).

Fatima and Khadijah remain the sole wives of their spouses during their lifetimes, particularly unique in an environment where polygamous unions and divorce were the norms, yet they are unable to develop a benevolent mother-daughter relationship. Equally, Fatima is unable to develop a mother-daughter relationship with her daughter, Zeinab. Using Irigaray, it is possible to argue that Fatima is an *Athena*, psychologically strong and outspoken, not for herself, but for the benefit of her father-god, Mohammed, her husband, Ali, her sons Hassan and Hoseyn, dedicating her existence to the ambitions and ideals of an androcentric religious tradition. Although frail and sickly, she undertakes the responsibility to physically support her father when he is assaulted and humiliated, she undertakes the responsibility to be the nurse and 'mother' over his other wives. Her economic and social poverty is secondary to the ideals of Mohammed and Ali, it is her duty to protect their symbols and language at the expense of her personal happiness.

Shi'ite scholars contrast Fatima's position to that of A'isha, who is strong, independent and antagonistic to the ambitions and ideals of Mohammed, and she is thus portrayed as the chaotic, selfish woman who is a threat to the religious tradition and patriarchy. Fatima's character is defended in terms of divinity, purity, immortality, youth

and the lack of blood. A'isha is contrasted through conversation over menstruation, and as authors such as Noddings and O'Flaherty point out, menstruation reduces the woman to a polluted, aging and quarrelsome character. Fatima, however, is venerated:

Fatima used to speak when she was in her Mother's womb; when she was born, she fell on the ground in a prostrating position with her finger raised. (Sirat Al-Muwla, Dhakha'er al-Uqbi; see Ordoni, 1987:17)

Fatima's fantastic birth suggests that she descended from the heavens and the divine, that she is not truly the daughter of Khadija, but is a human *hourī*. Her birth and immediate prostration demonstrate to Khadija that Fatima is there to promote and support the ambitions of her father, Mohammed, the messenger of God. Fatima's immediate awareness of the religious tradition indicates that she is only concerned with the ideals of her father and not with developing a benevolent relationship with her mother. Ordoni claims that "when Fatima reached nine years of age, she was a full-grown woman who enjoyed intellectual maturity and integrity of conduct" (Ordoni, 1987:141; Fadlullah, 2000:68-72; Qummi, 2001:38-41), implying that it was not necessary that she develop a benevolent intimate relationship with her mother, because she already possessed direction and knowledge. According to Irigaray's theory, Fatima was the adult-born daughter, the *Athena*, from her father, Mohammed. Her quick maturity defends the Shi'ite position asserting the immaturity of A'isha who, as a mortal, was a six-year-old girl when the Prophet married her, and therefore could not compete with Fatima as the 'mother of her father'. A'isha represented the mortal aspects of the female, she was sexual and evidently displayed emotions of jealousy and envy (Shariati, 1980:11-12; Stowasser, 1998:30-31).

The Sunni and Shi'ite schools each have different interpretations regarding the positions and veneration of A'isha and Fatima. Although it is not the interest of this paper to demonstrate the essential difference regarding the gender positions, it should be noted that the Shi'ite position presents a more ethereal position for Fatima rather than the realistic human characteristics of A'isha. The ethereal aspect allows the faith to ascribe to eternal constructions, particularly with relation to the twelfth Imam who opted to remain hidden until the Golden Age. Shariati protests that women are often asked to relate to

Fatima in their social realities, but the social constructions of traditionalism are reflected in the interpretation that women cannot exercise their positions as guardians of the religious tradition. The dual aspects of Fatima's life are not extended to women, instead the patriarchal structures wish to emphasise one part of Fatima's character and define the stronger aspect of her personality as a divine attribute (Shariati, 1980:52; Stowasser, 1998:32-33).

I concur but would add that Fatima possessed the strength to benefit her personal situation; if she had used her immense knowledge of the religious ideology amongst the believers, she could have established a benevolent sisterhood of communication to other women. However, she elected to support her men, relegating her interests to the shadows, emphasising and defending the male symbols and language of Shi'ite tradition. Although as an *Athena*, she possesses power and influence over women, as well as men, the Shi'ite scholars have interpreted her stance as one of submissiveness and obedience to her father, Mohammed, and husband, Ali. Such a position is problematic as a self-determining concept for Shi'ite women, who would struggle to express self-identity and yet adhere to religious tradition by defending and supporting male ideals and ambitions. Emphasis on Fatima's frailty entitles the religious authorities to reduce women to weak and dependent creatures that need guidance and protection.

A problem that arises when interpreting social reality from the perspective of religion is that images, say of Fatima and Zeinab, are cemented, according to the roles they played in specific events, and not as an accurate reflection of their lives. As such, their messages for the believers, taken in a contemporary context are often not relevant to today's social and political environments. Mircea Eliade suggests that icons, when related in their original contexts, provide guidance and hope to the believing populations, but socio-political situations change, along with their populations, often distorting the original symbols and language in order to maintain their relevance. Traditional power structures and personal interests distort symbols through the passage of time (Eliade, 1991:75-79; Allen, 1998:35-46; Reynolds and Capps, 1976:5-8; Young, 1987b:13-18; Waardenburg, 1980:42-46), such that the positions taken by Fatima and Zeinab are problematic for contemporary believers. Shi'ite women today struggle to identify with Fatima other than as a religious icon that offers little social advice or character development. I would argue

that if the patriarchs prefer to maintain the outdated characterisation rather than adapt it to the needs of contemporary contexts, then the society becomes outdated but also detached from religious relevance. Other than remembering the icons, Fatima and Zeinab, on certain dates, what significance can be attributed to these characters in a modern context?

The emphasis on Fatima's frailty and Zeinab's weeping, hinders women from constructing strong role models that are empowering. Why is Ali described as a strong and heroic individual, who slashed and slaughtered enemies but still maintains his virtue and religiosity? If anything, at times of crisis, he seems weaker in character than Fatima. After Mohammed's death, Fatima remained strong whereas Ali retreated in silence. Omar and his companions begged Fatima to acknowledge them (Ordoni, 1987:156). The de-emphasis of the physical strength of the mythic women is debilitating to real women and remains a secondary attribute when men review their symbols of bravado and honour. Shariati believes that women have no direction, no responsibility and no philosophy of life because the male-dominated environment has eclipsed this space and denied the woman access, constantly citing the ethereal behaviour of Fatima rather than presenting a realistic viewpoint. Shariati concludes that this creates two groups of women in the social reality - the veiled, conservative traditionalist and the bored, opulently bedecked woman - of which neither form offers any suggestion of emancipation and psychological growth for younger women (Shariati, 1980:100-101; Stowasser, 1998:41; Shaaban, 1995:75-76). For Irigaray two such extremes in the presentation of women is a male response to defining the female according to his image (Irigaray, 1985a:103).

Irigaray has asserted that women have been developed into a male-defined construction of the feminine that simply satisfies the needs of the male population, existing only in response to the male stomach and what lies below the stomach, which gives credence to her existence and her human mandate (Irigaray, 1985a:104). In the Shi'ite context if seeking more definition in terms of religious meaning, then a woman must resort to chanting, lamenting and prayers of solitude (Shariati, 1980:101-102). What is often not perceived is that women utilise these opportunities of religious veneration to give shape to their lives, their lamentation is the repressed anguish that is shrouded behind closed doors, veils and hearts. Respect is the reward for the woman

who bears her emotional anguish and abuse in silence; she is 'admired' in an environment where men do not have to listen to their objects (women) and bear any responsibility. However, Fatima also espoused revolutionary opinions within her generation and her misogynist environment. This was an environment where the female was a non-entity; a man only counted his male offspring and female infants were often buried alive or cast into wells:

if a father has a daughter he wants to remain,
whenever he thinks of her future, he should
think about three different sons-in-law:
one - the house that will hide her;
two - the husband who will keep her
three - the grave which will cover her!
And the last one, the grave is the best.

(Shariati, 1980:107)

By being the stronger entity in the triad with Mohammed and Ali, Fatima strengthened not only the position of her male family but also her personal status. It could be perceived that she could never have the absolute authority but she could direct her men to improve their social status and gain respect. Denied of her *Fadak* inheritance, she became the inheritor of her father's values and his religious message; the extension of the male determined system of ethics. In a social environment where the male is always stronger, female strength is curtailed and dominated. However, I would argue that the symbol of what was considered such independent thought in that period is not conducive to the contemporary environment and the manner in which women seek to identify themselves. The symbolic significance of the mythical representation is no longer appropriate or alternatively, the appropriation must be adapted for it to make sense in a contemporary environment (Allen, 1998:170-179; Eliade, 1991:65-75; Reynolds and Capps: 1976:26; Waardenburg, 1980:54-56).

In an environment that despised the birth and maintenance of females, Fatima's birth and that of the fourth daughter to the Prophet must have seemed disastrous in the social dynamic of lineage, but it makes perfect sense in constructing a male-prescribed

religious, female archetype. Isolated from other females, due to her father's despised position and lack of material wealth, she never participated within the wealthy Quraish clan. Her birth itself is marked by the lack of female attendees from her mother's clan to aid as mid-wives. Instead a celestial construction is manifested and the attendants are Eve, Mary, Kulthun and Assiyah - considered to be amongst the most perfect women in Shi'ite religious history and myth. Fatima becomes the 'mother of her father' - *al- abidha* - in the manner in which she cared for and supported him in political and religious struggles. But on the divine path, she is the link between Adam and the other Prophets (Shariati, 1980:114-115; Rachnavard, 1987:51-56; Fadlullah, 2000:43-44).

Fatima's earthly life is dominated by her ascetism; she is very poor, has few possessions³⁹ and works labouriously. Her sisters, in comparison, married wealthy men and detached themselves from their sister and their father. It is however interesting that Shi'ite scholars, Fadlullah, Ordoni and Bilgrami, reduce women to the level of objects, yet criticise women who also want to amass smaller objects. After all, I would suggest that the sole manner in which disempowered women can illustrate their power and happiness is through the ability to acquire these assets and to display to others what makes them happy. Rejecting accumulation reflects her adherence to the masculine concept of ascetism that defines such materialistic behaviour as trivial and earthbound. Fatima detaches herself from the social dimension of women and dwells within the environment of the male (Shariati, 1980:152-153). Abu Bakr is claimed to have been dismissive of Fatima, whom he regards as a 'stupid woman'. He added that men should not be intimidated by her in terms of reclaiming *Fadak* or granting Ali the caliphate (Ordoni, 1987:304). Yet the entire reality and symbolic significance of Fatima rests on her ability to promote her identity as that which possesses heart and strength.

The Imams are eternal; they are not bound to the earth and to nature but transcend life and death as mortals. They are representatives of God and therefore of a male God and not of woman. Women therefore have no real substantive role within the development and unfolding of the spiritual history. If men and women are opposites,

³⁹ On seeing the small blanket Fatima and Ali possessed, Mohammed presents a cloak given by Gabriel - in this manner Fatima has contact with the divine (Shariati, 1980:139).

then immortality is not the preserve of women, for they are tied to the earth, to nature and to mortality.

8.2 SOCIAL REALITY

Fatima is ever pure, but the mortal woman is contaminated with evil, she does not retain her virginity and once married never regains her purity. Instead of developing benevolent, female sisterhoods within religious tradition, women despise the younger female and the younger wife who is respected and admired because of her youth. The youth of Fatima poses another interesting dynamic, in that Shi'ite scholars insist that she was married at nine years old to Ali and that she was already intellectually and physically mature (Ordoni, 1987:141). The earliest onset of menstruation is at nine years; before that the mortal female can be interpreted as still pure and close to God.⁴⁰ At such an age the girl, in Shi'ite tradition, is old enough to marry, yet she has had little opportunity to bond with her mother. Furthermore, in such traditional social structures she will never have opportunity to bond with her daughters and instead will develop a nurturing and subservient relationship with her husband and her sons. For Irigaray, such religious interpretation reduces the female to a concept such as property, where in the service of her husband, she reproduces the species, men (Irigaray, 1993:4). She lives in domestic isolation from other females, and cannot participate within men's lives, other than to nurse and reproduce them.

Being a human *houri* entitled Fatima to eternal virginity, youth, and no defilement (Ordoni, 1987:125-126). According to Irigaray, the male constantly searches for such a female, only to be disappointed (Whitford, 1991b:80); as such, Shi'ite girls are expected to meet the physical characteristics of Fatima, over her psychological strength and knowledge. This young child, in her isolation, is stunted psychologically and lacking

⁴⁰ In several traditional societies a girl must be married before she menstruates, it is considered bad luck for the father to have a menstruating daughter still living in his house (Goodwin, 1994:26).

mediation of older caring women, is reduced to a subservient, mindless creature. In the androcentric Shi'ite myth and belief, this nine-year-old image of Fatima is the perfect woman constantly playful and sexually aware, yet pure and not polluted. She exists without the need for female affections from her mother and sisters but purely for the benefit of her husband. Irigaray claims, that because the girl has been removed from her maternal home, without the opportunity to acknowledge and appreciate her mother, she is unable to realise her blood ties with her mother and her maternal lineage (Irigaray, 1993:2). However, in Shi'ite myth, the mother does not establish a benevolent relationship with her daughter, and opts to create alliances with her sons instead, as she has only acknowledged her daughter's temporary residence until marriage. As such, she accommodates her daughter as a guest and as an extension of herself, seeking to mould the child in her image, or of that of the religious icon, Fatima.

Mircea Eliade explained that although the characters and their journeys in religious mythology are over-emphasised in terms of their personality and heritage, this serves a greater purpose (Eliade, 1991:21-23; Allen, 1998:65-66; Reynolds and Capps, 1976:2-5). For example, in the Shi'ite myth and interpretation of its male symbols, the story of Fatima, although she is an *Athena* to her father-god's ideals and ambitions and a guardian of the religious tradition, paradoxically demonstrates an avenue of self-determination for Shi'ite women in an environment that considers them worthless and expendable. In briefly referring to Keddie (2000), one can deduce that many Shi'ite women envisioned Ayatollah Khomeini as an Ali, and felt it was their responsibility to guard his ideals and ambitions, and many women chose to wear the *chador* to demonstrate their adherence and subservience to the ideals of Shi'ism. In the contemporary unfolding of socio-political events, religious characters and symbols are imbued with perfection, immortality and divinity in order that their stories, such as that of Fatima and Zeinab, transcend time (Allen, 1998:150). Douglas Allen continues that the religious symbol reveals structures in our societies that are not evident on the level of immediate experience. Much of the symbolism and mythology respond to the historical milieu in which they originated, where the actions of their heroes and heroines are considered brave and auspicious. The problematic issue is that the actions of the heroines, Fatima and Zeinab, were possibly temporary because it was in response to particularly hostile encounters. In interpreting

these events, Shi'ite scholars and patriarchy have determined these responses to be the essential personalities of Fatima and Zeinab, and that Shi'ite women should therefore aspire to redefine their personalities in accordance with those of Fatima and Zeinab.

The question I would ask is: Why do Shi'ite women possess a single role model upon which to model their lives, and one so far removed from the social reality of most contemporary Shi'ite women? The Shi'ite male has several role models, and the humanity of the Imams is constantly mentioned in the religious texts. The Imams displayed emotions, lust, avarice and vengeance yet these emotions are credited as being normal, human virtues for men, but not for women. Women therefore exist in the shadow of the religious tradition, on the periphery of the male-defined realm of divinity and purity. Women cannot imitate the male Imams, neither can they imitate Fatima or Zeinab, or command the respect granted to any of these Shi'ite religious characters. Locked into the notion of motherhood, which is only a role, the essence of Fatima as *Athena* leaves many Shi'ite women isolated from a model for developing relations with their daughters and other female relatives. Instead, the emphasis on motherhood is limited to subservience to the male children and catering to the ideals of the husband, which is to father many sons. Motherhood is symbolically represented as an enforced occupation, for the benefit of the religious tradition and to provide a manner in which to guard it, where, according to Irigaray, women sacrifice their ambitions and lives to the male symbols and language (Irigaray, 1984a: 65). Female emotion is lost in the process of sacrifice, but for the male, the emotions of power, bravery and success reign so that these attributes (symbols) are sought and cherished.

According to Eliade, religious attitudes are difficult to separate from their social contexts and where the female is linked to the distant past, the male is associated with the advancement of society, culture and consciousness (Eliade, 1991:42-44; Allen, 1998:23). So although the female is considered to personify kindness (although she is corrupted by evil), this attribute is rejected when the warrior model is embraced (Noddings, 1989:81-83; Keller, 1997:61-68; Young, 1987a:119-121). Here the male claims victory, as he is most visible and recognised, and the idealised female is the one who supports his ideals and ambitions. She is silent, subservient and self-sacrificing to his desires, and she will educate other women to adhere to the principles of her father and husband. She remains

in the shadows, supporting the ambitions of the warrior; she is ignored and her contribution forgotten in the androcentric record of myth and history.

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CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

Deus ex Machina is at play in the symbolism of the female in religious mythology, and it does not desire female, benevolent relationships or a sisterhood of communication. In a patriarchal environment, where the ideology is male-constructed, women are subservient and invisible slaves, serving their masters and supporting their ambitions and ideals. For Hindu and Shi'ite women the social reality is similarly devoid of strong, independent role models that engage the socio-political reality and triumph over the male-dominated reality. Although Irigaray, Bennet, Birge and others indicated that there is a lack of a mother-daughter relationships in the development of religious tradition, this study has established that there are no benevolent female relationships within Hindu and Shi'ite mythology, nor are there realistic heroines and role-models for women to admire and imitate. The symbols embraced by these heroines in the myths have been shown to be those dictated by male-defined and constructed environments, which perceive the strength of the woman to be directed in the interests and ideals of the male divine. The Hindu goddesses and the Shi'ite heroines all display psychological strength and determination, but it is a strength directed at preserving and guarding the male-dominant religious tradition, making the females subservient and tolerant of their husband's ambitions and ideals. Irigaray insists that the mythological heroines are the original sacrifices to the establishment of a new social reality. These women present themselves as silent supporters and observers, relegating themselves to the shadows of their men's ambitions and ideals, where female identity is eliminated. Instead, according to Irigaray, the male is the creator of the new religious tradition, and only men can relate and utilise the symbols and language (Irigaray, 1980a: 16). Denied of an identity, the female is reduced to an object and becomes silent property.

I have utilised two different constructions of religious tradition in order to demonstrate the lack of benevolent female interaction, namely that of Shi'ism and Hinduism. Although the two faith structures contrast in their structural and creative format, both do not give the female personal ambition and autonomy. In the Hindu construct, where the symbolic feminine possesses independence, such as the *mahavidyas*, Kali and Dhumavati, the social environment is chaotic, violent and polluted with blood

and death. Another construction of female independence is the goddess as *shakti*, but eventually she succumbs to the stereotypical female characteristics of love and loneliness, and is dominated and controlled by Shiva, and eventually the *trimurti*. Although the female *shakti* is shown to have immense power and independence, some scholars point out that the myth illustrates that her power can only be constructive and creative if it is controlled by men.

Such a development is consistent in Hindu myth, for example, in that characters such as Sati and Parvati, although strong in character, direct their energy and emotion to the fulfillment of their spouses, who are oblivious of their wives' sacrifices. According to Irigaray, the woman allows herself to be the original sacrifice to the religious tradition, although she is not permitted to interact with the religious structures and the symbols (Irigaray, 1984b:80). As such, it is possible to view the goddesses, Sati and Sita, as sacrifices for their husbands', Shiva and Rama, ambitions and ideals. For Irigaray, the concept of sacrificing male life to avoid insult and gossip is regarded as somewhat inane by patriarchy (Whitford, 1991b: 91) which, along with the male perception that such traits are feminine, therefore reinforces the idea that it is a woman who should be sacrificed to quell these accusations. The sacrifice of men is left to defending their symbols and language, and is therefore considered admirable and imbued with heroism. Sati and Sita both sacrifice their bodies in order to quell gossip and accusation, and yet both females still want to guard the religious tradition that has sought their personal sacrifices but not reciprocated with gratitude and veneration.

The goddess Sita has been interpreted in two forms in this dissertation, namely as land and as a woman, in order to create a sense of understanding regarding her subservience to and adoration of Rama, the king of Ayodhya. However, although both forms are subservient and supportive of religious tradition, the final retreat of Sita, displayed to the audience, is indicative that a woman retreats to the shadows of the male-defined environment, where she is silent and invisible. On the other hand, I have argued that Sita's behaviour can also be construed as the woman who creates a maternal lineage, and refuses to accommodate the male-constructed social environment, in fact making Rama's cries to the earth, silent and his form, invisible.

The *mahavidyas*, Kali and Dhumavati, present an image of independence and express their personal identities in an environment of chaos and loneliness. Kali, with her silent husband, Shiva, appears destructive and chaotic without male dominance and social control. Kali, as Irigaray would suggest, is not subservient to Shiva's ambitions and ideals, therefore is not a guardian of the religious tradition. Kali can be seen to demonstrate the emotional turmoil of Hindu women, the unhappiness and the anger generated through their silence and complicity.

Dhumavati, characterised by the androcentric-interpretation of a widow, is silent, deserted and alone. She has not complied with the patriarchal construction of the subservient and silent widow, by opting for self-immolation and continued subservience to her deceased husband, Shiva. As such, she is seen to suffer ostracism from the male-dominated social reality. Unlike the Hindu male, who is entitled to seek renunciation in adulthood, Dhumavati, the Hindu widow, is forced to undertake this renunciate position and rescind her material assets to her male relatives. Although independent of the influence and ideals of her husband, she is not entitled to embrace the male symbols of financial independence and personal strength. As a wife, according to Irigaray, she is only entitled to defend the male symbols and language (Irigaray, 1984a: 63). Dhumavati is the mirror of society, and its disdain for the older female and the chaos a young widow engenders. The independent Hindu wife, now considered an inauspicious character in the community, is prevented from developing benevolent female relationships or to initiate a sisterhood of communication. Similarly, Dhumavati can also be seen to reflect the senior Hindu wife, also considered inauspicious, who is invisible and undesired in her community and family.

In Hindu and Shi'ite mythology, the goddesses and the heroines stand alone. Although brave, smart and cunning, they remain a footstool and a nurse to their fathers, husbands and sons. They possess no friends, neither confidantes nor intimate female relations; where only females are present, antagonistic and unfriendly relationships develop. Their existence plays through the lives of male relatives, where women provide the foundation upon which men's egos and their religious traditions develop. The strong personal identities of the Hindu goddesses remain submissive and tolerant of the abuses they are subjected to by their spouses. Often there is admission by these women, Parvati

and Sati, for example, to remain subordinate to the ideals and symbols of the men, because they consider their roles as devoted wives and nurses. The Shi'ite heroines, similarly, possess strong and determined personalities, but they consider their positions as subservient women a necessary factor in being the guardians of the male-defined religious tradition. Fatima, as an *Athena*, instructs her daughter, Zeinab, that her first concern is to her brother, Hoseyn, as he will become the brother-god who desires her to be the guardian of his ambitions and symbols. As an *Athena*, Fatima determines that her daughter, as well as all Shi'ite females, must develop their femininity similarly to her; as Irigaray implies, in terms of the religious tradition, the *Athena* is the model of femininity (Irigaray, 1980a: 12-13).

The male-dominated social reality infers that Hindu and Shi'ite women must accommodate the goddesses and heroines as role models within the religious-cultural structure. There is an absence of benevolent relationships among any females within the construction of the religious tradition, and where they do exist, they are based on the *Athena* approach, which is not concerned with equality and love and female happiness. Sati experiences emotional turmoil as her parents reject Shiva and Mena criticises Parvati for performing prayers to win Shiva, regardless of the fact that Sati was reincarnated to again seek her partner, Shiva. Fatima, the *Athena*, informs Zeinab of her duty to her brother, Hoseyn.

Fatima surrenders her personal happiness so nurse her father, Mohammed, and husband, Ali, in order that their ambitions and ideals are promoted and realised. Her daughter, Zeinab, experiences a peripheral relationship with their mother, who regards her daughter as a temporary guest who will become the subservient woman in another household. Fatima exists within Zeinab's life to confine her personal movement and to deny her a voice that does not reflect the interests of and service to the father-god. Irigaray stated that the *Athena*, here Fatima, is not concerned with developing benevolent relationships with other females (Irigaray, 1980a: 12-13) particularly with her daughter, Zeinab, her mother, Khadija, or her step-mother, A'isha.

It can be argued that the behaviour of the Hindu goddesses and the Shi'ite heroines is in response to specific events that reflect male dominance and male interest, in the particular historical context, and is not necessarily reflective of their true personalities.

Sati sacrificed her life for Shiva, Parvati exists purely for Shiva, Sita sacrifices her dignity and happiness for Rama and Kali is alone and ruthless. Dhumavati possesses no relationships and was responsible for her widowhood, a theme that has permeated the social reality of ordinary Hindu women. Fatima and Zeinab, although possessing strong personalities, are depicted as subservient to the men. As such their actions appear to be self-sacrificing and directed towards maintaining and guarding the religious tradition; it is then determined, by the male interpreters, that all believing mortal women must adopt the behaviour of the goddess and the heroines, as a permanent aspect of their identities.

In the case of the heroine, Sita, the opposing female characters, such as Ravana's demon wives, wish to consume Sita as they detest her beauty and love for Rama. Instead of developing a benevolent sisterhood of wives, there is an army of jealous women with clandestine motives. Even within the private domain of the female, other females engage in preserving their favoured position with the male, never considering that undermining his position could best serve them as a group of women.

The construction of the Hindu goddess and the Shi'ite heroine presents women with a choice of archetypes, but the choice lay between two extremes: Hindu women can either be Sita or Kali; Shi'ite women can either be Fatima or A'isha. The principle character personifies perfection whereas the opposing character is the quintessence of evil and moral corruption. Qummi, Tabataba'i and Mutahari fail to recognise this diametric opposition in which female characters appear as extremes, embodying all characteristics that allow either veneration or degradation. The lack of female relationships exists simply because religious authors interpret this as important to maintaining social order. For the traditional religious interpreter, for example, Fadlullah, Hazra, at-Tabarsi, women possess no female relationships because they exist simply to serve the ideals of men, and the traditionalist interprets what he physically sees and respects in his environment. Irigaray concluded that believing, religious women are confined in a cage of ideals that are unrealistic in terms of developing a female subjectivity and identity (Whitford, 1991b: 19)

My conclusion is that to reinterpret the literature, an iconoclastic approach best suits the purpose. New interpretations must occur outside the parameters of specified traditional norms. This is not to say that reinterpreting a religious icon is reinterpreting the faith or religion; it simply shifts interpretation from the patriarchal perspective to a

more egalitarian stance. Reinterpretation can still utilise myths and symbols but the symbols need to be altered. For example, Eliade's and Waardenburg's interpretation is that mythology appears relatively consistent to maintain credibility but that the symbolic representations also change and meander along with changing social conditions and political history. Therefore, the female needs to alter the way her position is symbolised and move away from merely occupying male-dominated roles. There is a need for women to project their characters beyond parochial perceptions by incorporating symbols that have previously been the preserve of male heroes.

My observation is that traditional religious scholars and authors have merely regurgitated literature and norms that promote traditional obscurantist ideologies. Often those authors, male and female, who claim to promote and uplift the female position, invariably meander towards the traditional, subservient position of women, unwittingly illustrating the androcentric socio-political dimension. In this manner, women are forced to accommodate this position, although authors may claim that it is a revolutionary position that protects and uplifts the social status of women. Other than Shariati and Murad, most authors shy away from tackling the political establishment that claims legitimacy through the social compartmentalisation of the genders.

Authors of Hindu literature separate the mythological figures from real social conditions, opting for either position, but seldom both. Although several historians and religious scholars such as Kinsley, Coburn, Dalrymple and Hess, reinterpret these figures, they detach them from the social and economic reality of the changing position of the mythologised women. It is not the mythology that limits women; it is the existing social reality of women that shapes the mythologised feminine in any particular historical context. Importantly, Mircea Eliade and Waardenburg implied that mythological interpretations constantly change and therefore the symbolised feminine experiences subtle changes. Symbolisation of the feminine is not stagnant, it changes according to the desires of the political elite and socio-economic dictates; an angle missed in most of the literature. The feminist authors, Erndl, Leslie and Marglin, although introducing a new angle and hence a new interpretation, have unfortunately used the modern secular environment in which to define the immortal female. They place modern social interpretations of society onto old belief systems in which the language of certain social

norms, such as self-determination and individuality, were not a commonly recognised and tolerated feature. Only Irigaray and Sharp appear to have noted that the misogyny is directed from the political economy rather than simply from overzealous traditional religious scholars and theologians wanting to reduce the position of women.

This paper sought to demonstrate the lack of representation of any benevolent female relationships in Hindu and Shi'ite myth, but it has not tied in the lack of benevolent male relationships, which is best suited for a larger research undertaking. It is often the lack of equality between men and therefore virulent suspicion of each other, that is reflected in the position of the female. Women are the mirrors in society; what the masculine feels is betrayed in the position and the role of the feminine. Although Gold, Hirst, Irigaray and others point out the economic reality that reduces women to subordinate status, I feel that incorporating this information would greatly impact on the understanding of real women and therefore of the female in mythology. On the basis of a politico-economic reality it seems best to reinterpret the religious texts - but not in the modern, secular sense; rather, the social history would best demonstrate the direction and attitudes. Simply put, the mythic heroines veered from social norms through their political elitism: Parvati and Sita were after all the daughters of kings, Himavat and Janaka respectively, whereas Fatima was the daughter of a prophet from a very influential Quraysh tribe.

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