Goddesses and Women's Spirituality: Transformative Symbols of the Feminine in Hindu Religion

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South Africa's transition to democracy is founded on a constitution that aims to ensure equity among its people with regard to race, class, gender, sexual orientation and religion. The process of social transformation heralded by this political transition, however, is proving to be an arduous and painful path to nationhood, one marked by violence and inequalities among all of the above social categories. Nevertheless, tolerance, even celebration, of cultural and religious diversity seems to be emerging in South Africa, alongside policies striving to ensure gender equity in political representation, the workplace and socio-economic well-being. Here, perhaps, lies the potential for transformation in South Africa in the domain of religion and spirituality as well. However, important questions remain concerning freedom of religion and gender equity: To what extent do women experience freedom *in* religion? And to what extent is there gender equity in the symbolic discourse of religious traditions? These questions are not new and this essay by no means lays claim to addressing them for the first time; instead, it aims to engage with and problematise them with regard to finding symbolic resources that would empower women's religious and spiritual life.

My focus will be to examine these questions in relation to symbolic discourse in religion around issues concerning gender difference in general, the feminine in particular and, most specifically, symbols of the "divine feminine" in Hindu tradition. A core aim will be to reflect critically on the symbolic significance of the goddesses of Hindu myth from two perspectives: first, to unveil the androcentric bias embedded in these symbolic constructions that maintains a patriarchal structure in Hindu tradition; and second, to explore a feminist perspective that opens up avenues whereby these same symbols may turn out to be resources for women's psychological and spiritual empowerment.

Analysis of the potential for transforming these particular symbols, I would argue, has relevance not only for South African Hindu women, but also for

South African women who are seeking an alternative spirituality to that of the "mainstream" monotheistic religious traditions. The latter refers to women who aspire to female images or expressions of the divine or the spirit, whether they are found, for instance, in new religious movements, ecofeminism, goddess worship, neo-Paganism, or the teachings and philosophies of Asian religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.[1]

My analysis will draw on theory situated in several fields of study, including history of religion, psychology of religion, and psychoanalytic theory, with particular attention to the strategies of feminist scholarship within those disciplines. The use of feminist critique of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories in relation to gender, women's psychology, and religious discourse, especially the work of Luce Irigaray, will act as a signpost to pathways for women's search for "a divine made in her image" that can truly liberate women from the oppressive patriarchal constructions of gender relations in religious traditions (see Irigaray 1993a: 57-72). Since I will be focusing on images of the 'divine feminine' in the Hindu tradition, and their meanings for both Hindu and non-Hindu women, the issue of cross-cultural borrowing, appropriation, even misrepresentation, will also be considered – a vital consideration in the South African context of a nation striving to deal with religious diversity through a process of cultural encounter and exchange.

'Woman' as the empty and silent 'Other'

Gendered and dualistic concepts

Western society and culture is founded on a long history of patriarchy, which is underpinned by an equally long history of dualistic thought in philosophy, theology and psychology. The oppositional categories of male and female underlie other dualistic notions that are interpreted in ways that are both gendered and unequal. These are then perpetuated by the androcentric perspective of "man" as the norm of humanness and "woman" as the subordinate "other" that deviates from the norm. The concept of God as male – but simultaneously disembodied and transcendent – found at the core of monotheistic religious traditions is rooted in this history of dualism. It is expressed through the discourse of religious myth and doctrine. The discourses of Ancient Greek philosophy, early Christian theology, later Enlightenment humanist thought, and modern psychology have all consistently characterized the rational mind and transcendent spirit as superior to the body and sexuality. Since rationality, culture and disembodied transcendence have been constantly associated with men, women have faced the disempowering and oppressive androcentric ideology that links them with the body, sexuality and nature.[2]

Later, it will become more evident that the above gendered and dualistic conceptions are not limited to western culture and religion. For that matter,

feminist anthropologists have done extensive cross-cultural research concerning the implications for women's status in societies where gender relations are structured according to binary oppositions such as mind and body, culture and nature, and public and private domains (see, for example, Ortner 1974; Rosaldo 1974; Moore 1988). Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory of sexuality and gender, however, has been particularly effective in explaining – but also reinforcing – patriarchy and masculinist symbolic discourse in society, culture and religion. Psychoanalytic perspectives, then, are valuable in revealing how androcentric assumptions about patriarchal social structures and gender roles are deeply embedded at a psychic level (see King 1995: 8–10). These largely unconscious assumptions, I would suggest, are collectively expressed and given profound significance through the symbolic discourse of religious myth and ritual. My argument, therefore, is that feminist deconstruction of these psychoanalytic theories (such as the work of Luce Irigaray, which will be my particular focus) has made useful progress towards 'rewriting' androcentric symbolic discourse underlying the reality of women's subordinate status in most religions – a reality that has been assumed, at a deep psychic level, to be natural, immutable, even God-given.

Psychoanalytic theory

In his theory of psychosexual development, Sigmund Freud not only charts the emergence of individual gender identity, but also explores the realm of the unconscious to find out what part it plays in reinforcing the gender-specific roles assigned to men and women by patriarchy. While doing so, however, Freud seems to mystify women's psychology, as implied in his well-known reference to "the sexual life of adult women as a 'dark continent' for psychology" (1926: 212) and the "riddle of femininity". But what is even more significant for this study, is Freud's profound ambivalence towards women and "femininity", which is especially evident in his idealising the mother on the one hand, while repressing and denying maternal subjectivity and power on the other. His deductions about femininity are frequently defined by negative (even pathological) psychological tendencies and lack, for example: passivity, narcissism, masochism, lack of intellectual aptitude, and lack of the moral capacities of the superego. Freud, to his credit, does note that bisexuality is present in all human beings, and is at pains to identify both "femininity" and "masculinity" as attributes located in the psyche of both women and men. However, he later contradicts this conclusion by charting the attainment of femininity as an explicitly gender-specific *process*, that of the biological female child becoming a woman (see Brennan 1992: 7).

For Freud, femininity is ideally fulfilled in motherhood, in the earliest (preoedipal) relationship of mother and infant, most particularly in the mother-son relationship: "A mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her rela-

tion to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships" (1933: 133). It is in this instance that Freud appears almost to sanctify the mother, implying that she embodies love and represents the ultimate goal of female psychosexual development. Nevertheless, it is the Oedipus and castration complexes that take central place in Freud's theory of human psychosexual development, whereby the young boy must eventually leave behind the object of his Oedipal desires – his mother – to join the "masculine" world of the father. Male fear of castration and the spectre of disabling femininity lead to rejection of the mother and denigration of womanhood and its numerous inadequacies. Even in the case of the young girl, the eventual abandonment of love for her mother is said to be unavoidable for successful attainment of womanhood. According to Freud, both sons and daughters can only escape the mother's threat of engulfment of self through joining the father's world of social and moral development.

Post-Freudian psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, remains loyal to Freud's psychoanalytic theory in giving pride of place to the Oedipus and castration complexes in human development. However, Lacan diverges from the biological determinism of Freud's theory by charting human psychological development as a symbolic process driven by the intervention of language and metaphor, the "paternal law". With regard to the psychology of women, Lacan sees the feminine as inseparable from the prelinguistic register of the psyche, the Imaginary, which in developmental terms is equivalent to Freud's preoedipal stage of mother and infant relationship. Only the intervention of "paternal law" – or the symbolic "Father" – and subsequent separation from the mother, allow entry into the patriarchal Symbolic, the register of language, symbolic systems, social relations and creation of culture through which the human subject is constituted.[3]

For Lacan, separation from the mother elicits loss and mourning for an imagined state of "maternal plenitude" that is experienced by all human beings, female or male. In other words, the "feminine" becomes "mother", who becomes (m)Other, who becomes all women, who become representative of loss and desire, to be repressed in the unconscious and relegated to the silence of the presymbolic Imaginary (see Flax 1990: 103–07). But Lacan also spiritualises and mystifies the essence of "Woman" and female sexuality as emptiness, beyond representation, something that women can only experience but never speak. He therefore exalts and romanticises female sexuality with mystic nuances of women's access to transcendent experience, through the body and beyond the confines of the patriarchal Symbolic (see Mitchell and Rose 1985: 145–47). It could be inferred, then, that Lacan's "feminine" suggests a promising medium for women's autonomous expression of sexuality, psyche and spirituality. But in reality Lacan silences women, for actual women, as opposed to his essentialised "Woman", can only speak and express their subjectivity once they enter the paternal realm of the Symbolic. Like Freud, therefore, Lacan

betrays a profound ambivalence about femininity and women: While idealising a nostalgic sentiment of maternal plenitude that human beings eternally long for, and spiritualising a notion of "Woman's" essence, Lacan nonetheless relegates real women to the prelinguistic Imaginary, in the position of subjugated object – object of the subject's (Man's?) impossible desires.

Giving voice to women and female divinity

For women to experience themselves as whole in their lived reality, concerns about the psyche and spirit have to be brought to light. Luce Irigaray, French feminist writer and psychoanalyst, gives incisive attention to this very point. Much of her writing aims to deconstruct Freud's biologically-based theories of sexuality and femininity, and adheres instead to post-Freudian Lacan's focus on the sexualised subject and the primacy of language. However, Irigaray further aims to disrupt Lacan's androcentric discourse whereby female and maternal subjectivity is denied and relegated to the position of 'other', as subordinate to the male subject. She therefore experiments with alternative modes of expressing the feminine and the maternal body, so that female and male can relate as two equal and autonomous *subjects*.

Central to Irigaray's task is her critique of the marginalisation of the mother-daughter relationship in psychoanalytic theory, in favour of giving father and son, and the Oedipal process, centre stage. For Irigaray it is vital to construct a separate, autonomous feminine Symbolic where women can express their subjectivity. She emphasises restoring a genealogy of women, of mothers and daughters, so that the mother-daughter relationship can be a prototype for relations between women in which they will no longer be reduced to their reproductive function. The mother, then, can also be a woman and thus provide a model for the daughter to separate from her and individuate as a *woman*, in her own symbolic space (see Whitford 1989: 108-21).

Irigaray, then, moves beyond subversion of the androcentric discourse of psychoanalysis and the masculine Symbolic, towards creating an alternative and autonomous feminine discourse that will engender a new sexual ethics between two *subjects*. Moreover (and important, by the way, for our particular situation of cultural diversity in South Africa), she is at pains to assert that the maternal body provides a metaphor for all women, that it is a multivalent symbol which embraces difference and diversity among women:

> [W]e are always mothers just by being women. We bring many things into the world apart from children, we give birth to many things apart from children: love, desire, language, art, social things, political things, religious things ... We must take back this maternal creative dimension that is our birthright (Irigaray 1993a: 18).

Most important here, for our interest, is Irigaray's inclusion of "religious things". Recalling the history of a gendered division of mind and body in western, patriarchal religions, she notes that such androcentric religious discourse and symbolism offers no way back to the mother and body, only a way *up* "to heaven, toward the father and his kingdom" (ibid: 15). Once more, the mother, as both body and earth, is defined by lack, and must be subjugated and controlled to hasten human transcendence to some world *beyond* the one we have.

And yet, unexpectedly, Irigaray still insists that women do need divinity in order to become free and autonomous. Women do need an alternative way of relating to what is larger than themselves, for, she believes, "No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine" (1993a: 62). However, since the feminine is always defined by lack and exiled from the sacred space of man's construction of a uniquely male god, women need a god of their own – one that will revalorise women's subjectivity, sense of self, language and experience of the body, one that will value mother and daughter, fertility and nature. What is it, Irigaray asks, that holds women back from becoming "divine women"? Her answer suggests that "as long a woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own" (ibid: 63).

Irigaray, then, confronts and attempts to resolve the ambivalence towards women and the feminine that resides in the psychoanalytic theories of both Freud and Lacan. The symbolic discourse used to express the process of human psychological development, especially in Lacanian theory, inevitably sacralises the feminine while simultaneously denying female and maternal subjectivity and subjugating women to male dominance and control. Irigaray, too, links women's bodily experience to religious and mystic transcendence, but to own this sacred space as a separate, discursive space for women, she advocates that "we [women] must thereby enter further into womanhood, and not become more alien to ourselves than we were, more in exile than we were" (1993a: 60). However, I would suggest that Irigaray's perspective on women today as "orphaned, without she-gods, goddesses, a divine mother of daughters, without a spiritual genealogy" (1993b: 133), is perhaps limited by her focus on images of the divine in western, monotheistic religions.

Although she mentions Asian religions, almost in passing, in relation to the symbolisation of sexual difference, Irigaray seems not to entertain the possibility of cultural encounter and exchange (see 1993a: 77). Could these gods and goddesses, such as those in Hindu myth, offer the resources for creating female sacred space and "divine women"? She would, of course, find that Hindu symbolic discourse is just as masculinist as that of western, monotheistic religions: Hindu myth indeed represents and sacralises the feminine, but simultaneously subordinates and silences women. The ambivalence towards the feminine found in the theories of Freud and Lacan is quite clearly replicated in Hindu

myth of the gods and goddesses, but far more explicitly and richly expressed. However, the symbolic significance of these symbols does not, I would argue, end there. On closer feminist analysis, it may turn out that symbols of the divine feminine in Hindu tradition can surely be appropriated and "owned" by women – and transformed to attain what Irigaray seeks, namely, an independent, sacred space and separate, autonomous female Symbolic.

The divine feminine in Hindu tradition

Hindu cosmic order and gender

Hindu cosmology, in all its richness and complexity, accords equal and central importance to both the feminine and the masculine principle. These principles are symbolically expressed through the exploits of the epic heroes and heroines, gods and goddesses, who appear in the myths recorded in Hindu sacred texts. Although goddesses appear to play a relatively minor role in the Vedas[4] and are certainly outnumbered and overshadowed by the great gods, several goddesses of great power do appear in the Vedic myths (O'Flaherty 1980: 79). Moreover, a notion of a fertile source of energy that is undeniably feminine forms a consistent motif in the Vedas. Numerous goddesses and female symbols are clearly associated with cosmogonic functions and cosmological structures, signifying creative power and materiality.

The later and last class of Vedic texts, the Upanishads (ca. 800-300 BCE), took a more philosophical and abstract approach to conceptualising the divine. They brought focus to ascetic practices that aim for spiritual liberation (*moksha*) from the law of cause and effect (*karma*), and the continuing round of birth, death and rebirth (*samsara*). The divine, within this framework, comprises interwoven male and female creative principles: *purusha* ("pure spirit") and *prakriti* ("nature" or the "cosmic principle" of all manifest creation), respectively. In addition, the term *shakti* – also construed as female – refers to the primal, creative power out of which all creation arises. It is revered as the active dimension of *brahman*, the absolute, or ultimate reality itself. The notions of *prakriti* and *purusha* represent opposing ontological principles, continually interwoven in creative tension that renders them inseparable, the one always reflected in the other. However, *brahman*, as ultimate reality, is understood as transcending "all qualities, categories, and limitations", including the earthly confines of gender (Kinsley 1986a: 136).

Much later, by the sixth century CE, the great Goddess – known as Devi, as well as by many other names – had become a central figure in classical, post-Vedic sacred texts. The theistic and devotional sects of Vaishnavism and Shaivism (worship of the great Hindu gods, Vishnu and Shiva, respectively) were already flourishing by the third century CE in India, and the abstract principles described above were increasingly represented through the gendered symbols of

the gods, along with goddesses as their consorts. Then, during the medieval era, from about the fifth to the sixteenth centuries, Hindu theism and the practice of *bhakti* (devotion to a personalised deity) came to full fruition – becoming successfully integrated into the Brahmanical tradition and woven into the myths and doctrines written down in the great Hindu Epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and ancient stories, the Puranas.[5] The *bhakti* tradition remains the foundation and essence of popular belief and practice among most Hindus today, in all parts of the world.

The sixth century thus saw the blossoming of a third major devotional sect, Shaktism, worship of the Goddess both as the more abstract, creative power, *shakti*, and as the supreme deity, Devi. The development of popular Hindu goddess-worship during this period, along with explicitly Shakta texts, generated a theology of the great Goddess as a feminine rendition of the supreme being or ultimate reality (see Pintchman 1994: 178-84). While the ultimate reality in the universe is conceived as "a powerful, creative, active, transcendent female being", the multiple Hindu goddesses in the epics and Puranas are generally understood to be "different manifestations of an underlying feminine principle or an overarching great goddess" (Kinsley 1986a: 133; 4). But David Kinsley, in his watershed study of these goddesses, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Tradition* (1986a), insists that, just like the male deities, each of the numerous and diverse goddess figures - whether consorts of gods, or independent of any male deity - has an individual, coherent mythology and theology of her own, although the goddesses have received far less attention than their male counterparts in religious studies scholarship and Hindu theology.

Hindu social order and gender

Given the apparent gender inclusivity of Hindu cosmology, it is easy to assume that the symbolisation of gender in Hindu sacred myth signifies equality of male and female and an empowering resource for women's spirituality. This may be so, but only by bringing a feminist analytical perspective and reinterpretation to bear on the largely androcentric ideals, religious laws and social norms that these symbols represent. In short, literary myth and theology can never be divorced from what they symbolise in society and everyday religious life, both past and present. The basic premise that myth and symbol express both a model for and reflection of social structure – including gender roles – as well as providing a basis for religious practice, is crucial for assessing the significance of goddess figures for women in Hindu religion and society.

Conventional Hindu sociocultural and religious structures are hierarchically gendered, maintaining patriarchal arrangements and male dominance, particularly in the context of the family. In this regard, the legal codes of Hinduism – especially those attributed to the ancient sage, Manu, in *The Laws*

of Manu – lay down the expected ideals, norms and regulations for social relations in Hindu society. Marriage is deemed vital for social stability and is clearly essential for women to have a recognised position in society. According to Manu's prescriptions, a woman is required to be an ideal wife, or *pativrata*, that is, devoted to her husband as though he were *pati*, a "god", always subject to his control and sacrificing her own well-being to ensure that of her husband and family (Carmody 1989: 51; McGee 1991: 78; Young 1987: 73-75). Although the wife and mother is of pivotal importance in the family, and is the one who is expected to be 'more religious' by practising daily domestic religious rites, these rites are offered entirely altruistically, for the well-being of the family and the purity of the home. If there is any consciousness of her own spiritual development at all, it is simply to perform these rites as a way to progress to rebirth as a man – for, according to orthodox Brahmanical Hindu doctrine, this is the only path available for women towards *moksha* (see McGee 1991). This normative arrangement of gender relations applies no matter how odious the husband's behaviour might be, since marriage is the very foundation of the social order (*dharma*) in Hindu tradition. In fact, a girl or woman may never be independent but, from the cradle to the grave, should always be subordinated to the authority and control of a man:

> By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons ..." (*The Laws of Manu*, 5: 195-99; cited in Young 1993: 277-78).

In spite of his legitimisation of women's subordination, Manu, as it turns out, betrays a surprising – although familiar – ambivalence in his attitude towards women. Women should also be protected and respected at all times and, as wife and mother, a woman should be revered and worshipped in special ritual performances as the embodiment of the goddess in the home: "Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards" (*The Laws of Manu*, 3: 85; cited in Young 1993: 277). Not unexpectedly, though, a woman's most revered status is as mother of a male child, unequivocally perceived as the "best way for an Indian woman to gain prestige and honor" (Carmody 1989: 53). Procreation, especially of sons, remains one of the essential and most important duties of marriage. Freud's much later investigation and explanation of patriarchy, and his ambivalence towards femininity and motherhood, can, therefore, be accorded at least some cross-cultural application. The evident ambiguity of the wife's position in Hindu tradition – on the one hand as controlled and dominated by her husband, and

on the other, as idealised as a representative of the goddess – is reflected at the level of religious symbolic discourse in the characteristics of the goddesses who appear as 'wives' of male deities in Hindu myth. Furthermore, I would argue, Manu's regulation of women's normative role in Hindu society is underpinned by the patriarchal and androcentric conviction that women and female sexuality are dangerous if not controlled by a male and the confines of marriage and motherhood. The opposing issues of control and independence are also clearly reflected in the diverse symbolic representations of the divine feminine in Hindu myth.

Hindu goddesses

What therefore emerges most dramatically in the myths of the goddesses is an expression of profound ambivalence concerning the meaning and value of the 'divine feminine' in Hinduism. Such ambivalence is rooted in the frequently paradoxical characteristics and personalities of the various goddesses, whether it be among different goddess figures or within the nature of one goddess. It is this ambivalence, and even paradox, I would argue, that we need to explore further in order to transform the androcentric bias of Hinduism's gendered symbols. In this way, women could be offered an accessible divine in their image that does not silence them or define them as the empty 'other', but rather empowers their own voice, subjectivity and spirituality – in Irigaray's terms, offers them a separate and autonomous female Symbolic. This exploration will be pursued by way of a brief account and critical analysis of two of the myriad goddess figures who are represented in Hindu myth, namely, Sita and Kali. I choose these two figures not only because of their sharply contrasting natures and symbolic meanings, but also because they remain two of the most popular Hindu goddesses in Hindu devotional tradition, even if in similarly contrasting contexts. Furthermore, they prove to be two Hindu symbols of the divine feminine that have been most subject to critique by feminist theorists and activists, in both Indian and western cultural contexts.

For the purposes of academic study, the goddesses of Hindu tradition can be divided into two types, among others: those who are wives or consorts of gods and those who are unmarried or, at least, independent of male influence and dominance (see Babb 1970; Kinsley 1986b). It has been noted by Indologist, Lawrence Babb (1970) that goddesses in the former category rend to be benevolent, while those in the latter tend to be fierce and even malevolent. These particular categories, and the characteristics attributed to them, offer a helpful distinction for interpretation of the meaning and value of the goddesses, in terms of power and gender relations at both cosmic and social levels. Later work by scholars of Hindu religion have stressed, however, that they are not static and impermeable classifications, since the Hindu goddesses and their attributes tend to overlap and interweave between the two, rendering them

equally useful as pointers for uncovering the ambivalence and complexity of the goddess's symbolic significance (see Brubaker 1989; Erndl 1993; Kinsley 1986b). Sita would be located in the former category, and Kali in the latter – in fact, Sita and Kali could well be regarded as the opposite extremes of that particular continuum.

Sita

First, Sita – portrayed as both human and divine in nature – is widely acknowledged as the most popular epic heroine in Hindu religious tradition. Most commonly known as the wife of the god Rama, Sita is one of the major protagonists in the great epic, the *Ramayana*, written around two thousand years ago by the ancient sage, Valmiki. Although both Rama and Sita are worshipped as deities in the *bhakti* tradition, Sita is rarely worshipped independently of Rama - her persona, both human and divine, is almost entirely defined in relationship to her husband. If myth should provide an ideal prototype for human relations in society, then this divine couple seems to represent the very essence of myth's function. These figures arguably fulfil Hindu ideals of marriage and royalty: Rama as perfect and powerful king who dispenses his rule as a model of social integrity and justice, and Sita as ideal wife, or *pativrata*, whose every thought revolves around her husband, and who remains steadfast and loyal to Rama through thick and thin (Kinsley 1986: 68-70). For centuries, Sita has been held up as the quintessential exemplar to young Hindu girls as they approach marriage.

Sita's mythic role is illustrated in several incidents throughout the narrative of the *Ramayana*, one after the other proving her self-sacrificing devotion and sexual fidelity to Rama against all odds. Her character is tested through exile, abduction, ordeal by fire, and banishment, all of which are marked by separation from the object of her love, but none of which dispel her loyalty to Rama. She does, however, emerge as a woman of spirit, courage and endurance, and is not beyond rebuking Rama when he is insensitive to her situation as a result of adhering too rigidly to his kingly duty to his subjects. Rama, in fact, aspires to be the ideal king but surely falls short of the mark of ideal husband. In short, Sita's loyalty to Rama is not always reciprocated in kind.

Two examples of incidents shaping Sita's persona as ideal wife will be used to show that she does not always wholeheartedly embrace the implied submissiveness of that role. After her rescue from the kingdom of the evil Ravana, who had abducted her from the forest where she and Rama had been in exile, Sita is returned to Rama's kingdom. However, certain that Ravana's power and lust must have conquered Sita's resolve to be pure and faithful, Rama self-righteously repudiates her. She, in turn, rebukes him for his lack of faith in her affection and love for him. Nonetheless, her fidelity and loyalty to Rama know no bounds in her intent to prove her purity. She commands a funeral pyre to be

built and with a "fearless heart" and "in the presence of all" she enters the flames, addressing the god of fire: "As I am of pure conduct, though Rama looks on me as sullied do thou, O Witness of the Worlds, grant me full protection" (Valmiki's *Ramayana* 6.120; cited in Kinsley 1986a: 74). When she emerges unscathed, Rama acknowledges her purity and they are reunited. Just as the story is set to end on a note of 'happily ever after', Rama falls victim to gossip that his subjects are not happy with his reacceptance of Sita for, after all, she has been with the enemy. Rama therefore banishes Sita – who is pregnant at the time – to the forest, predictably giving his kingly responsibilities precedence over his love for her. Sita, ever the devoted wife, cannot find it in her heart to blame Rama, believing, still, that this misfortune has befallen them through some fault of her own, even if from a past life. She spends years in the forest, raising their twin sons alone. If ever a metaphor for the separation of the domestic (as female) and public (as male) domains were sought in religious myth, one would have to look no further than the story of Sita and Rama. However, when Rama recalls Sita after several years, he demands that she face yet another ordeal to prove her innocence, and his own righteousness, once and for all. Agreeing to do this, Sita nevertheless loses her will to continue in this world and asks the goddess of the earth to take her back: "If, in thought, I have never dwelt on any but Rama, may the goddess Madhavi receive me" (Valmiki's *Ramayana* 7.97; cited in Kinsley 1986a: 76). The earth, as goddess, duly embraces Sita, leaving a grieving Rama to live out the rest of his life as king, in loneliness and sorrow. To the end of her earthly life, Sita's whole reason for being revolves around Rama, and only Rama, but her final act could surely be seen as one of defiance, rather than submission.

Although Sita may often be seen as the most obvious example, among all the Hindu goddess figures, of wifely submission demanded by the *Laws of Manu* with regard to Hindu marriage and gender relations, a certain element of ambiguity can be detected. Sita may well consider herself to be secondary to Rama's importance as husband and king, but she is not always silent or entirely submissive. Ultimately, she chooses spiritual liberation above continuing her earthly relationship with her husband. Her love and loyalty to Rama, against all odds, can further be construed as a metaphor for divine love and surrender, as an example to devotees and spiritual seekers. Moreover, it has been argued that Sita represents an embodiment of *shakti*, "the energy that inspires the hero Rama to action", and of the fertility of the earth and natural world (see Dimmit 1986). For instance, when Sita is absent from the kingdom, animals, plants and trees seem to lament and wither; and on her return, "Fruitless trees became fruitful; trees without flowers abounded blossoms; those that were withered sprouted leaves, and the foliage dripped honey" (Valmiki's *Ramayana* 6.12; cited in Dimmit 1986: 215).

The latter representation of Sita arguably reinforces a long-standing

androcentric dichotomy whereby nature is associated with women and the feminine, and culture with men and the masculine. However, it also serves to ensure that Sita's human nature as epic heroine is elevated to the divine level of goddess - goddess of fertility and divine mother. As such, Sita is not merely an inferior adjunct to the male deity, Rama, thereby providing a metaphor for Hindu women's role as submissive wife, but she is also metaphor for one half of the universal whole, the activating energy of the world. From this perspective, then, it is possible to see how Rama and Sita are believed to have been incarnations of divinity: of the great god, Vishnu, who maintains the order of the universe, and his consort, Lakshmi, goddess of fertility, prosperity, auspiciousness and compassion. Nonetheless, Sita's identity as loyal and faithful wife to Rama remains the symbolic representation most commonly upheld as a model for young Hindu women entering marriage. In this popular role, Sita stands in stark contrast to the independent and powerful "dark" goddess, Kali.

Kali

The theology of the great Goddess, Devi, as supreme being and ultimate reality, flourished in the medieval era of the *bhakti* tradition. This conception of the divine feminine in Hinduism was crystallised in the sixth century CE in a relatively small text called the *Devi-Mahatmya*[6] which glorifies Devi and narrates three main myths where she is called upon to vanquish demons who are disrupting the realm of the gods.[7] Devi's participation as warrior and protector in these cosmic crises well defines her paradoxical nature which is vividly portrayed in her benign and terrible forms: On the one hand, Devi sometimes appears as exceptionally beautiful, associated with erotic desire and pleasure, as well as maternal symbol of fertility and nurturance; but on the other, Devi can sometimes assume fierce and terrible forms as protector of the cosmos, to the extent that her ferocity can become uncontrolled and bloodthirsty in ways that even threaten the stability of the very order she aims to protect (Kinsley 1986: 144). Despite the ambivalence of Devi's nature, though, the myths unequivocally assert the Goddess's function as saviour when the worlds are in danger.

Devi appears in this text and other sacred literature, too, in diverse names and forms, the two most well-known and popular being Durga and Kali. To highlight symbolic forms and meanings contrasting with Sita's, she will be examined here in her most terrible form, the goddess, Kali. In the *Devi-Mahatmya*, Kali appears as an embodiment of Devi's anger and ferocity. She also appears in many other sacred Puranic myths as well as many of the Tantric texts. However, her overall image, particularly in Indian iconography, is consistently hideous and horrifying (Brown 1989: 110; Gupta 1991: 21; Kinsley 1986b: 144-45). For example, red eyes, matted hair, pendulous breasts, emaciated body, blood dripping from her mouth, human heads around her neck and waist, dead infants hanging as earrings from her ears, add up to the appalling awfulness that is Kali.

Kali is the "black goddess" who springs from Durga's forehead when, consumed with anger, she fights the demons to restore cosmic order. However, the battleground between gods and demons is Kali's playground, and sometimes her energy becomes mad and destructive as she rushes into battle, apparently intoxicated by the blood of her foes.

Kali is, indeed, free and uncontrolled in the sense that she is an independent and dominant character – although she sometimes appears in partnership with the great god, Shiva, as the 'dark side' of his usually benevolent and 'golden' consort, Parvati (Kinsley 1986b: 146). However, as spouse of Shiva, Kali is most commonly portrayed as the dominant partner, sometimes standing or dancing upon his naked and prostrate body. The imagery is explicitly erotic, with Kali above Shiva's erect phallus, a union symbolising the dominant power of the female in the creation of the universe. It is Kali, in her maternal and reproductive role as Shiva's *shakti*, "who will receive the cosmic seed and bring forth the universe from her womb". Despite the intense and even threatening energy of their partnership, Shiva elicits Kali's maternal role as cosmic mother, arguably "beginning to bridge the gap between her horrific and benign modes ... Her destructive energies are now perceived as part of her transformative powers involving both growth and decay" (Brown 1989: 114). Kali is both creator and destroyer, embodiment of life and death in the continuous cosmic cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Kali's mythology, as a metaphor for gender relations, undoubtedly reinforces the patriarchal and entirely androcentric conception of uncontrolled – and therefore threatening and dangerous – female sexuality, depicted in this goddess's outrageous contravention of Hindu ideals of social order, wifely virtue, and motherhood. But in spite of her fierce nature, Kali is seen as maternal redeemer by her devotees, and no matter how much she may look like the 'mad mother', she is always approached as the 'divine mother'. In fact, in Bengal, where worship of Kali is particularly prevalent, images of this goddess have been beautified to a certain extent and made to look more benevolent (McDermott 1996: 299). Nevertheless, it is still easy to perceive the contrast between Kali's nature and exploits that clearly turn social norms upside down, and the ideals of *pativrata* and domestic order that Sita more obviously fulfils.

But interpretations of Kali in the Tantric texts are even more complex and tend to reveal her deeper significance for spiritual life (see Brown 1989; Gupta 1991). As feminist scholar of Hindu tradition, Lina Gupta, points out in her article, "Kali, the Savior" (1991), Kali is most obviously beautified in these texts, sometimes even described as young and lovely, with a gently smiling face. Each aspect of Kali's body symbolises an analogous aspect of consciousness, and at the level of spiritual transcendence, her terrifying nature is understood as salvific, symbolising her power to destroy ignorance and transform the deluded ego (see Brown 1989; Gupta 1991). As Kinsley explains it, Kali represents

"blood and death out of place", or the often chaotic nature of real life, recalling that the Hindu ideal of *dharma* (social order and religious duty) fails to allow for the fragility of human society and the unpredictability of nature. But even more important, in relation to the human quest for spiritual liberation, Kali serves to remind seekers of a realm that transcends *dharma* and beckons "humans to seek a wider, more redemptive vision of their destiny" (Kinsley 1986b: 152). Ultimately, it seems, spiritual aspirants have to renounce the comfortably safe and secure order of *dharma* and surrender to the goddess, who will take them to the threshold of *moksha*, or liberation. The question remains, however, as to whether this symbol of spiritual power, Kali, is particularly empowering for women. Do women have access to this power? Can women, as active subjects, ever *be* this power, be "divine women", as Irigaray puts it?

Conclusion: "a divine made in her image"[8]

What does all this mean for women's psychology and spirituality, and their lived reality in society and religious life, especially in South Africa – or anywhere, for that matter? My argument is that Hindu religious discourse and symbolisation of gender, given form by the myths of the goddesses, express and validate the explanations of patriarchy of both Freud and Lacan, including their repression of, and ambivalence about, female - and more particularly, maternal - subjectivity and sexuality. However, I maintain that the very same symbolic discourse has the potential for transformation into a resource of empowering symbols for women's lived experience in society, culture and institutionalised religion, as well as for their own personal spirituality. I would also argue that this transformative potential is accessible not only to Hindu women, but also to women in western cultural contexts who yearn for a divine in their own image. Nevertheless, the potential problems and pitfalls inherent in the latter context should not be ignored.

If we begin with Sita, her identity and role in the story of the *Ramayana* seem to fulfil the expectations of patriarchy to perfection. Sita is indeed idealised, and even sacralised, from a deeply masculinist point of view, in which she is constrained by male expectations and demands and confined to the domestic realm. Not only that, her symbolic significance, even in her myth of origin – in which King Janaka unearths his daughter, Sita, while ploughing the earth – associates her with nature and fertility (Kinsley 1986a: 67-68). The point, of course, is that here the riches of the earth are brought forth by the king, implying that without the king (male), the earth's (female) creative potential cannot be tapped: a metaphor, perhaps, for the bond of marriage between male and female in which female identity is dependent on the male. This theme continues throughout her marriage to Rama in which her divine identity seems to manifest only through Rama. Sita raises her sons in the forest, alienated

from society and culture, and yet remains loyal to Rama and apparently fulfilled by maternity and domesticity. Indeed, she proves Freud correct in his interpretation of femininity and becoming a woman in patriarchy. Moreover, she lives up to the expectations of the *Laws of Manu*, as the model self-sacrificing wife, no matter how short of the ideal her husband might be.

It is important, then, to note that Rama's less than compassionate nature as a husband has not escaped the notice of Hindus throughout the centuries since Valmiki's *Ramayana* was written about two thousand years ago, despite the fact that Rama's image as the ideal man, with the ideal wife in the ideal kingdom, has endured in Hindu tradition to this day (Hess 1999: 2). A number of vernacular versions of, and commentaries on, the *Ramayana* - from the Hindi *Ramayana* by the renowned sage, Tulsidas, in sixteenth-century north India, to a recent, serialised *Ramayana* on India's government-owned television network - have found ways to re-create Sita's ordeal by fire so that Rama is transformed into a more sympathetic figure (ibid: 5). But what about Sita? Indeed, her close link with nature does confirm her divinity and, in the end, she attains liberation in reunion with the goddess of the earth. A perfect model of self-surrender for the spiritual devotee, whether female or male, but where is her voice for the lived reality of women in patriarchy? Does she remain the self-sacrificing *pativrata*, to be mimicked by all Hindu women? Clearly, she does conform to Lacan's sacralisation of the feminine - of 'woman' - where, yes, she is transported to a transcendent realm, but she is simultaneously silenced, entirely denied a voice in the patriarchal Symbolic.

Linda Hess's article, "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife" could hardly be more apposite in this regard, showing that "[f]eminists, political activists, artists, and writers have increasingly found ways to say 'no thank you' to the orthodox model [of Sita]", ways that have not been limited to outright rejection or erasure of Sita and her story (1999: 17). In many cases, "[n]ew poems, plays, and dances have sought to imagine a Sita who was not robbed of her voice and personhood by patriarchal tradition". For once, this revisionism is not the result of influence from Euro-American feminism, nor has protest, radical critique and reinterpretation remained only in the domain of "highly educated, English-speaking, urban feminists" in India, since diverse grassroots groups have also produced "subversive, ironic, and critical treatments of *Ramayana* themes in women's, folk, low-caste, and dissenting literary cultures". Women's poems and plays, for instance, frequently ask Sita to speak to ordinary women, and indeed she does, in a number of different ways. She may speak as an angry Sita who rejects Rama and all he stands for, as she does by berating Rama, for example, in Snehalata Reddy's 1973 play, *Sita*:

"History has never recorded the whole truth ... if I dare now, more women will dare ... I hope and pray that, by exposing your masculine pomposity, ab-

surdity and injustice, who knows, I may be able to sow the first seed of revolution" (cited in Hess 1999: 18). Or she may be a Sita who presents an alternative vision to that of ideal daughter to a father or ideal wife to a husband, by pointing to an autonomous female domain: "by returning to mother earth, she shows daughters an ideal of unity with their mothers and with the earth" (Hess 1999: 19).

These new symbolic discourses around Sita surely come close to Irigaray's intention to develop a new genealogy of women, offering an alternative metaphor of mothers and daughters that produces "a divine in her own image" and honours the subjectivity, creativity and spirituality of women. As Hess's cautionary comment reminds us, "the oppressive, patriarchal view of Sita isn't going away" (1999: 22), but with courageous rewriting and reinterpretation, this view can also be transformed by Hindu women, wherever they may be located. Furthermore, such transformation does not demand that Hindu women reject their religious tradition, since religious tradition does not remain static in history. Rather, it is a dynamic and fluid process of creating meaning and value, including, as scholars of religion have clearly shown us, the act of negotiation and continual renegotiation of religious myth, symbol, and contextual meaning (see Chidester 1991: xiii). But women have been, are, and can be, active agents in this process.

Turning to Kali, we have noted a representation of the other extreme of masculinist perspectives of femininity, a vision of the potential danger to society if female sexuality is not channelled into the safe confines of marriage and male control. But, as explained earlier, this is far from the whole story, as Kali's nature is complex and ambiguous in its symbolic significance, especially in the sphere of spirituality. Of interest here, in contrast to feminist revisions of Sita within Hindu tradition in India, is the inclusion of Kali in the exponential growth of feminist and "New Age" literature on goddess spirituality in the West since the 1980s, and even in new forms of goddess rituals developing in the practice of women's spirituality (see McDermott 1996). Although most of this type of literature and practice revives and reinterprets goddess figures from ancient European and Near Eastern cultures, it was the innovative work of feminist scholar of religion, Rita Gross, who especially brought the attention of western women to the goddesses of the living Asian religious tradition, Hinduism, calling women of different cultures to share insights and theoretical resources to inspire and empower each other (Gross 1989). For Gross, feminist scholarship in religion needs to forge ahead with cross-cultural study, not forgetting that sensitivity and care is required to deal with the dangers of crossing the cultural distance between western and eastern forms of religion. But she nevertheless claims that "if approached critically and carefully, and if intelligent selection and borrowing is utilised, the Hindu goddesses can be the greatest stimulant to our imagination and to our speculation about the meaning of

the goddess" (ibid: 218).

A criticism that can be launched against some goddess literature that appropriates symbols from distant cultures, is that careful and sensitive treatment of the original home of a particular goddess is often blatantly lacking. In looking at the particular growth of popularity of Kali in this very context, McDermott points out the pitfalls involved in the process of "cross-cultural borrowing". Misrepresentations of Kali in western feminist literature mostly derive from lack of study and knowledge of Indian history, language and texts that form the basis of Hindu tradition within its own culture; and misinterpretation of recent archaeological evidence. Keeping in mind constraints of space, just one of McDermott's many examples is instructive here: Claims that Kali was a historical figure in a gynocentric, goddess-oriented world during an ancient Neolithic period are "simply not true", since she is first mentioned in Hindu scripture only in 500BCE and then, even more to the point, "it is not until the sixth century [CE] *Devi Mahatmya* that she rises to prominence and is equated with other goddesses" (McDermott 1996: 297).

What is at the crux of the matter here, I feel, is feminist reconstruction of myth and its meaning in the wider context of religious life that involves ongoing negotiation of meaning and power through media such as myth, symbol and ritual. The meanings and uses of a goddess figure such as Kali will change according to the dynamic process of history and cross-cultural encounter - which is undeniably a reality of today's globalised world, a reality replicated in microcosmic form in South Africa - and this, surely, is what religious myth is all about. Women in many cultures of the world are creating new myths, new rituals, and new symbolic meanings in their striving for psychological and spiritual wholeness, and for ways of living unencumbered by the constraints of patriarchal religious doctrine. Claims to historical fact and textual accuracy, however, are problematic and it is here that care - and honesty - on the part of the interpreters is vital. Are such claims even necessary in the imaginative and visionary process of re-creating myth and negotiating new meanings? As McDermott concludes: "Symbols have their own lives. So do goddesses. One should not expect Kali in the West necessarily to look like Kali in the East" (1996: 305). In South Africa, the issue is as complex as it is fascinating - imagine who Kali might be, for example, for a South African-born and raised, western-educated, young feminist Hindu woman searching for symbols to empower her in a male-dominated society and to enrich her spiritual life in a male-dominated religion?

Most important, then, can Kali be a "genuine goddess of transformation" for women (McDermott 1996: 305) whatever their social, cultural or religious context? Recalling Gupta's article, "Kali the Savior", which is indeed based on study and sound knowledge of Hindu Tantric texts, she asks: "How can contemporary women identify themselves with a mythical character? I think there

is an interaction between a contemporary woman's psyche and the mythic behaviour patterns that inform and are played out in a woman's life" (Gupta 1991: 36). The ambivalence of Kali's nature and the paradox embedded in her symbolism - as fierce warrior and protective mother, as creator and destroyer, as goddess of life and death, as social deviant and spiritual guide - can be an empowering model for women, facilitating the integration of what might be regarded as the 'shadow' in any individual woman's psyche. Kali provides a channel for expressing long repressed anger that has, in the past, been deemed 'unfeminine'. Gupta describes her as "the personified wrath of all women in all cultures" and the expression of "a deep, long-buried emotion" that, in the myths, is always an appropriate response to situations Kali finds herself in. In other words, Kali's anger is not arbitrary or random, "[s]he is not simply malevolent" (ibid: 31). Only because the power and wrath of the warrior is conventionally understood as a male function, is Kali often "described as a masculinized female or as out of control and destructive, as if strength and valor are constructive character traits only as long as they are part of a male deity" (ibid: 32).

Kali's independence and active sexuality, too, can help redress androcentric denigration of the body and repression of female sexuality. As Gross puts it, Hindu images of the goddesses in general, and of Kali in particular, point to the "reintroduction of sexuality as a significant religious metaphor ... helping us to move beyond the lingering body-spirit dichotomy and consequent hatred of the body" (1989: 228). Kali's power and sexuality offer women a multi-faceted, transformative metaphor and tool for regaining wholeness, physically, psychologically and spiritually. This goddess can indeed be a goddess of transformation and wholeness in helping "to heal divisions in women's lives" (McDermott 1996: 305).

Finally, if nothing else, Kali is not silent, in spite of her significance for transcendence and spiritual liberation. She counters Lacan's image of transcendent "woman", confined to the silent, pre-symbolic Imaginary, and comes much closer to Irigaray's desire to construct an autonomous female discursive register that would give voice to women's agency and subjectivity. Moreover, Kali's image as mother-goddess shines new light on old patriarchal notions of motherhood - still deeply ingrained in the psyche of many women - that would go a long way towards resolving the ambivalence about maternity identified in Freudian and Lacanian theories. Again, Gross expresses this best by pointing out that although we need to revalorise mothering and nurturing through a notion of 'God as mother', we should not glorify motherhood as divine at the cost of reinforcing masculinist belief that "human motherhood itself is a sufficient role for women" (1989: 224-25). Hindu goddesses, she reminds us, are mostly worshipped as 'mother' and "references to the life-giving creative motherhood of God are omnipresent", but they are, nonetheless, rarely depicted as

mothers of biological children. This certainly applies to Kali; and even Sita - one of the few goddesses who is mother of children - is attributed with far greater divine powers of creativity and control of the earth's fertility.

All this serves to underscore the important symbolic significance, with regard to Hindu goddesses, of motherhood as metaphor for a wider, multi-faceted female creativity that "means something more subtle than the role of cosmic housewife and diaper-changer" (Gross 1989: 25). Irigaray's contention that "we are always mothers just by being women. We bring many things into the world apart from children, we give birth to many things apart from children" (1993a: 18) is powerfully present in the many forms of the Goddess as mother in Hindu myth. Such female images of the divine surely fulfil Irigaray's passion to create "a divine made in her image", which she had found to be missing in religious discourse.

In conclusion, I contend that such symbolic discourse of the divine as female, maternal and powerful is available to all women, including South African women, of all social classes, cultures, religions. It is available as a creative, dynamic and transformative means of liberating women's spirituality from the constraints of patriarchal religious discourse - especially if, after all, we, as women, are "always mothers just by being women" and if we yearn to "take back this maternal creative dimension that is our birthright"(ibid).

Notes

1. For more on these types of religious movement in South Africa, see Maxwell, Diesel and Naidoo (1995); Steyn (1994); Van Loon (1995); Wratten (2000).
2. The literature on the gendered and androcentric nature of dualistic philosophy and theology is vast, but the following are helpful for more on this subject: Lloyd (1984) and Synnott (1993).
3. For a clear and accessible explanation of Lacan's map of the human psyche, psychosexual development and culture that comprises three "registers" - the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real - see Sarup (1992).
4. A vast corpus of ancient sacred texts, in four main classes, dating from around 1500 BCE, that form the foundation of orthodox Brahmanical, or priestly, tradition in Hinduism.
5. For a history of Hindu theism, *bhakti* and textual sources, see chapters 6 and 7 of Hopkins (1971).
6. Part of one of the major *Puranas*.
7. For translation of this text and excellent commentary and analysis, see Coburn (1991).
8. As suggested and desired by Irigaray (1993a: 63).[1] For more on these types of religious movement in South Africa, see Maxwell, Diesel and Naidoo (1995); Steyn (1994); Van Loon (1995); Wratten (2000).

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