

APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers

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ABSTRACT

Apsaras, in Indian scriptures, are the holy *hierodule* of heaven with astounding beauty, grace and sensuality who are common to all the gods in Indra's court. Their dalliance with the mortals and sages begets progenies leading to notable dynasties. While motherhood is typically based on a worldview wherein fertility and nurturance are considered as integral to the essence of femininity, mythology abounds with archetypal images of *Apsaras* who are biologically mothers but are not maternal. This paper attempts to explore the archetype of the *hetaira* (Wolff, 1956) within the feminine *psyche* and their roles as inconsistent mothers that does not necessarily make them less of a woman. The myth of the birth of *Apsaras* from the milky ocean is amplified to the dynamic principle of creation. Explorations into the myth of Menaka-Vishwamitra shed light upon the *Apsara's* role as not only a means to test the seeker's resolve or to create impediments in *sadhana* but also to guide the seeker-seer in the path of inner-illumination.

Keywords: *Apsara, Hetaira, Psyche, Myth, Archetypal Feminine.*

The *Apsaras* in Indian mythology exemplify the *hetaira* aspect of the feminine as ethereal spirits personifying nature's beauty and voluptuousness with a prominent undercurrent of eroticism and sensuality. In the *psychic* sphere, they represent the fertilizing potency that reinforces human's creative tendencies to emanate from the depths of the spirit. They embody the harmonious amalgamation of creativity and spirituality, romance and mysticism, earthly and Elysian, integrating art (sacred songs, hymns, dance, iconography, symbols, architecture, sculpting, etc.) as an intrinsic element of religious practices. Just as a creative calling challenge us to expand our limits in the quest of realizing our true potential, it links us to the very core of our being – the spirit – which is the source of such a calling thus, the creative function serving as a catalyst to connect with the transcendent function.

Hetaira: Soulful Companion

“There are women who are not meant to bear physical children, but they give birth to a man in a spiritual sense, which is a highly important function” (Jung, 1976).

The *hetaira* aspect of the feminine *psyche* envelopes the transformative character of the *anima* in the form of a female aide who relates to the man not merely at the primary level of

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the instinct but expands beyond to the realm of culture and the spirit. She embodies the psychological *matrix* rather than a physiological one. Instead of investing her libido on being the womb of motherly nurturance and protection, she becomes the womb for germination and creation of ideas, philosophy, art; often imploring the man to explore, invent, discover and can function as the alchemical womb of transformation.

The lofty standards that our culture places upon the feminine as wife-mother, based upon moral grounds, relegate the image of the *hetaira* to recede to the subterranean regions of the unconscious as the ‘other woman’ within creating opposing tendencies. Instead of reconciling the dichotomy between the Eve- *Hetaira*/ Madonna- whore, women often repress the sexual aspect. A *hetaira* type may deny her own inner nature as the society demands her to imbibe wifely virtues. If she is to embrace her archetypal feminine type, she runs the risk of being labelled as the social pariah.

Often treated as the *persona non grata* who is looked down with suspicion, abiding in the shadowed alleys of the female *psyche*, the *hetaira* has been known culturally by multiple names such as the siren, enchantress, temptress, mistress, concubine, *femme fatale*, black widow, slut and so on.

The *hetaira* as an archetype has its roots in ancient Greece where the term literally meant a ‘female companion’; usually referring to an elite courtesan with a highly cultivated mind, refined tastes, educated, adept in arts such as dancing, singing, music, ability to hold intelligent-witty conversations and could attend symposiums along with the men folk. The nature of her companionship can range from intellectual, spiritual or sexual levels, “or all three at once, but not necessarily all three” (de Castillejo, 1997). Due to the nature of their independent professional practices they enjoyed a freedom unparalleled to regular married women of the times who were mostly obligated to the duties of home and hearth.

Jung expresses that for a woman to become the “*femme inspiratrice* (inspiring woman)”, she must oscillate between the poles of “goddess and whore” instead of acting out a one-sidedness and must represent “all the doubtfulness and diversity of life, the highest skills and the highest Eros”. Such women are described by Jung as “manifestations of a much more developed culture” who historically played a major role in the “worship of the *anima*” (Harris, 2016).

Revived by Wolff (1956) in her work on the quaternary structure of the feminine *psyche*, this archetype can facilitate women to embrace their natural selves more freely instead of blindly trying to fit in the conventional ideal of Eve. The *hetaira* can be the gateway to inner *psychic* life in her form as the muse or awaken to deeper layers of consciousness. She can stir romance, beauty, sensuality – a precondition to any form of artistic expression, provide the appropriate mental stimulation essential for a new creation, discovery or conceptualization of an idea, or, like the Siren she can lead one adrift to squandering in her shadow expression.

Apsara: Principle of Creation

Mythological accounts narrate the emergence of the *Apsaras* at the beginning of creation from the churning of the sacred ocean of milk. Born out of the primordial waters of life, they inherit the aqueous essence as part of their being. The etymological meaning of *Apsara* highlights their affinity to water, with the Sanskrit root word *apas* meaning ‘water’ and their representation adrift in a sea of clouds. As a symbol of fecundity, they typify nature’s

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bounty and propensity to generate. Being elusive nature spirits, they dwell in deep forests and lakes of the unconscious, the winds of life force and change, clouds of ethereal dreams or quests, rain begetting a renewal and so on. Just as water can metamorphose into various states as liquid, vapoury, ice, snow, in a similar manner *Apsaras* are also considered to be shape-shifters amplifying the tendency of *psychic* energy to transform, with the ability to usher dynamic transmutations within the individuating personality and consciousness.

As the creative element, she gives form to the inarticulate feelings of the poet, her dance manifests in every stroke of the painter's brush to weave wonders, she is the inner prompt behind the philosopher's ideas, she is the yearning for expression shaping the intangible reflections of the writer into concrete words, her evocative movements transport the seer to the ethereal realms of consciousness – in short, she personifies the rhapsody of the spirit. She can be experienced as the uncanny pull that draws one in the direction of the soul's true calling.

The *Apsaras*, always considered as a group, are portrayed as eternally youthful and beautiful, free in their sexual practices and unattached to their partners. Accepted by neither the *devas* nor the *asuras* as their wives, they belonged to none but shared by all. None has her as his constant companion but she appears to a few souls as momentary flashes carrying dainty visions and intuition from the higher realms where she dwells. While deliberating upon the creative impulse, Jung mentions that it does not appear in all individuals with the same intensity; "certain individuals are picked, they have a particular gift" and that it is indispensable for anyone to be aware of his/ her creative instinct in the process of individuation as it is the "maker of personality" (Harris, 2016). At the subjective level, the *Apsara's* sexual force and freedom not only sublimates into creative endeavours, but also expresses the *psychic* urge towards unification. Her earthly counterpart is personified in the image of the courtesan whose sexual mobility and freedom is in tune with her aesthetic spirit.

The origin of the *Apsaras* at the beginning of creation, hint towards the primal nature of desire and the creative urge in humankind. The churning of the life-giving milk in the sea of the unconscious creates turbulence in order to ripen it and convert into another state, i.e.; to extract the much sought-after elixir of immortality. The primal waters coagulate and fantastic treasures emerge out of it that must be retrieved from the epicentre of our being manifesting in various forms: the *kalpavriksha* (fruit-laden cosmic tree), *parijat* (flower of heaven), *kamadhenu* (cow of plenty), *chintamani* (wish-fulfilling jewel), *Airavata* (six-tusked white elephant), Lakshmi (Goddess of abundance and fortune), Varuni (Goddess of wine), Dhanavantari (God of health and healing) with the pot of *amrita* and the *Apsaras* (heavenly hierodule) among other valuables. The unconscious hides precious jewels within its mysterious depths that can be churned out into the surface of conscious awareness, contributing to *psychic* fertility and plenitude (as symbolized by many of the gifts from the milk ocean), and ultimately the *amrita*, equivalent to the Philosopher's Stone in alchemy.

The *Apsaras* embody the sustaining or destructive energy of water that must be stirred out from the *psychic* depths to guide us while traversing the abysmal regions and undercurrents of its majestic fluidities. Depending upon our equation with her, she can either aid in steering the waves or engulf one in the bottomless trenches of the *psyche*, as the creative energies can also possess an individual. As Jung expresses that the creative process operates within an individual by the activation of an archetypal image which the artist seizes and

raises from the unconscious depths, transforming it and bringing it in relation to conscious ideals (Harris, 2016).

Apsara and the Hermit

The mythical pairing of the youthful maiden and the wise old man is a recurring theme with deep archetypal roots. Indian mythology abounds with numerous instances of *Apsaras* being commissioned by Indra, the King of the Gods, to seduce and foil the penance of the *rishi* or to create progeny with the king, following which she must return back to her heavenly abode. The episode of Menaka and Vishwamitra is the most popular among them wherein she is sent on a mission to distract the hermit from reaching highest ascetic powers. She succeeds in her attempt as the sage abandons his meditation to mate with her and eventually, they have a girl child named Shakuntala. But since Menaka must return back, she abandons the child who is later adopted by the sage Kanva. The licentious and wantonly ways of the *Apsaras* barely have any consequences as they continue with their free-flowing untamed spirit of the wind.

In *yogic* traditions, sublimation of sexual energies is believed to translate into creativity, intellect and spiritual acumen. *Shakti*, the feminine principle in Kundalini Yoga, is considered to lie dormant and coiled at the base of the spine that must be awakened and risen through a series of progressive *psychic* nodes/ *chakras* up to the crown, in order to experience wholeness of being and oneness with the cosmos (*yoga*). Hence, the feminine force plays an integral part in this process. The *yogi*-sage needs the *Apsara* – the manifestation of the feminine within – to facilitate in the arousal of the *psychic* energy which can be eventually sublimated into mystical experiences.

The union of the *Apsara* and the hermit also symbolize the elevation of physical beauty into bliss and beatitude. She represents a vision of the ascetic in which he must immerse in the realm of phenomena in order to surpass it, akin to crossing over images of seductive damsels at the gateway before approaching the inner sanctum of a temple. She presents to the seeker the first image of earthly life – a vision of the spirit. Appearing as a temptress to the sage, she's the first gate to the heavenly realm. By envisioning upon the effusive form of the celestial being, the seer establishes interaction with the spiritual realm thus, leading to sublimation and the spiritualization of matter. Such a process is illustrated by Jacob's Ladder as a metaphor for the life of an ascetic with a vertical progression in consciousness to ascend to the higher realms by transcending the bounds of time and space.

It is Indra, the Lord of the Senses (*indriya*), who sends his troupe of celestial maidens as his emissaries to the hermits or kings. Such an act of Indra corresponds to the impact of higher spiritual experiences upon the *yogi's* body in terms of neurological- physiological changes as exemplified by the rising of Kundalini through the energy centers in the body. Indra controls over the *indriyas* (senses) of the chosen seeker, either to calm down the fear of losing one's grip or to challenge his resolve until one has gained complete mastery over the senses.

Another narrative is related to the charming Urvashi, who was making love to the king Durjaya when he suddenly remembered that he has to fulfil his duties towards his wife. He took leave but promised to return to the *Apsara* after his duties are over. When he finally came back, Urvashi appeared disinterested and transformed herself into a dark-hairy hag and chased him away (Pattanaik, 2000). Her transformation represents both the alluring and terrifying faces of the *samsara* – worldly pleasures and sufferings – that must be overcome

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by a seeker to liberate from the endless cycles of birth and death. Prince Siddhartha, before he became the Buddha, had to surpass the temptations and demonic aspects of Mara's daughters who embodied the opposing energies to enlightenment.

Vishwamitra was approached by another *Apsara* Rambha, who was again sent by Indra, to disrupt his austerities, but this time the sage had mastered enough control over his senses, hence, he does not fall for the damsel's charms and curses her instead to turn into a stone for ten thousand years. Pattanaik (2000) reflects upon the theme of confrontation between the sages and the *Apsaras* in a historic-religious context as the transition from fertility cults to monastic orders. The voluptuous maidens stand for worldly aspirations, possessions and fertility in terms of increased crops, poultry, wealth and progeny, whereas; the hermit represents otherworldly pursuits and quest for absolute truth. Indra as the lord of rain, stands for the fertilizing principle on earth ushering forth vegetation and material blessings. He is angered by any attempt from an ascetic to cause disruption in his plan of Nature. Thus, he sends down the *Apsaras* to prevent the *rishis*, as the lord of fertility is opposed to the idea of asceticism.

Apsaras are however, not only a means to test the seeker's resolve or to create impediments in *sadhana*. Temples in India are adorned with figures of bewitching *Apsaras* to guide the seeker- seer in the path of inner-illumination. Furthermore, the amorous images of the celestial beauties highlight the significance of *kama* as one of the four goals in life according to Indian worldview, that can subsequently lead in the journey towards *moksha*.

The temple as an esoteric representation of all the elements that make up our concept of religion incorporates symbols and rituals to establish a semblance and communion between the heavenly and terrestrial realms. As a devotee steps into the sacred sanctuary, mesmerizing *Apsaras* embellish the archway and outer walls in exquisite carvings of Indian temples such as the Khajuraho, Hoysala temples, Sanchi stupa, Konark temple, etc. The representation of these divine damsels is in accordance with scriptural description of temple architecture regarding their placement within the sanctuary and their specific iconography depicting long flowing tresses, adornment with flowers- jewels, slender built, prominent thighs and hips, serene and gently smiling face, dancing poses, gestures- *mudras*, depiction of aspects from their sixty-four skills to awaken the senses and so on. Their indispensable place, usually in the threshold of the temples, is to guide the seeker towards the inner journey.

The *Apsaras* feature prominently dancing around the immense Angkor Wat complex in Cambodia, which is a replica of the Hindu cosmology with almost 1,800 carvings of *Apsaras*, each with a unique identification in terms of their stance, features, adornments, movement, gesture, etc. The archetypal roots of the *Apsara* dance goes back to the mythical legacy of the dancing damsels whose rhythmic motions transform the spectator to partake in divine delight and forge a dialogue with the sacred sanctum of the soul.

CONCLUSION

When Menaka abandons her infant daughter in the woods, she is surrounded by a flock of *shakun* birds (vultures), hence the name Shakuntala. *Rishi* Kanva rescues her and raises her as his own daughter. This motif of adoption by a foster father recurs across the mythologies of Sita, Karna, Satyawati, etc. It is a male who discovers the deserted infant, is drawn towards it, and assumes the role of the primary caregiver giving life to the child who was otherwise left to oblivion, thus, redefining the ambit of motherhood and maternal love. It

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presents to us an alternate perspective to the widely accepted naturalness of motherhood and its stereotypical association to the woman alone. I recall attending a theatre few years ago wherein a couple were enacting a scene of childbirth with the male helping in delivery of the child. Later, when the male actor was asked about how he felt while performing the role, his response left me wondering as he shared that he felt like a mother. Being a mother may not be the ultimate destiny or definition of womanhood for a woman to make her feel “complete”. She can experience wholeness of being even through the cultivation of the other archetypal forms of the feminine.

In summation, even though the *Apsaras* are infamous for being unavailable mothers to their biological children whom they abandon, but their fulfilment lies in giving a spiritual rebirth to the seeker. She is not merely an object for ephemeral delights of the senses but a medium for mastery over the same and attainment of spiritual wisdom.

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Conflict of Interest

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