

Women and Aging: An Archetypal Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Carl Gustav Jung, the founder of the school of Analytical psychology, posits that all human behavior is rooted in the realm of archetypes, or the universal exemplar models of behavior and being. Like all other human behavior, the process of aging is archetypally rooted and thus successful aging presupposes a successful realization of one's archetypal intent. The present paper attempts to discuss successful aging from an archetypal and mythological perspective. The focus is specific to the feminine and it is asserted that successful aging for women assumes a different character than that of men. Unlike a man's individuation journey that prompts him to seek boons outside, for a woman individuation and successful aging entail protecting and fortifying her own home base and realizing her inner Kore.

“From the middle of life onwards, only those remain alive who are ready to die along with life”

- Carl Jung

Swiss psychiatrist and psychologist Dr. Carl Gustav Jung was a prolific writer and thinker who deliberated intensely upon the issues and concerns of the conscious and unconscious life of people. Those familiar with him and his work would know that he wrote expansively on the process of aging and the various issues related to the same during the latter half of his life. Dr. Jung’s deliberations on the process of aging, more conspicuously called by him as the “second-half” of life have much to offer to us while trying to understand the notion of successful aging from a depth psychological and more precisely from an archetypal perspective.

Jung On Aging

Jung parallels with the rising and setting of the sun to various stages in the life of a human. All humans experience a steady growth and rising up in the first half of their lives, symbolically the morning time in their psyche, wherein they expand and grow into their own zenith. The youthful period of one’s life is symbolically the afternoon of life and the mid-life transitional phase coincides with the evening of life. Progressively the old age of human life is thus symbolically the night of life and the ultimate goal for the rising sun. This descent also calls forth in men a need for the “reversal of all the ideals and values that were cherished in the morning” (Campbell, 1976). Whenever the sun rises up in the morning, it knows however unconsciously that it is to ultimately reach the night time and there is no amount of battle that could possibly intervene and put a halt to this impending transition.

Jung focuses much attention in describing and acknowledging the tasks of the second half of life. He suggested in simple yet eloquent terms that “a human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species” (Campbell, 1976). Thus, he elevates the socially downtrodden status of the elderly by finding in them a great value for the species and suggesting that they have much to contribute to the life of the collective. He suggests that it is but a complete childish fallacy to assume that the second half of life should be a mere extension of the first with no real aim and purpose of its own. The process of aging entails a pursuit of the “cultural aim” of life. Jung advocates that: “the discovery of the value of human personality belongs to a riper age” (Jacobi, 1953). Thus, he does not rob the

aging population of their strength and purpose but assigns to them a higher task and responsibility of uncovering their true personality.

Jung asserts that “the hand of the clock cannot be turned back; what the youth found and must find outside, the man of middle life must find within oneself” (Jacobi, 1953). This inward turning is an essential process that allows the ailing man to subordinate his instincts to the viewpoints of the culture and thereby contribute extensively to its maintenance and propagation. Development of the culture presupposes a progressively intense training of the animal inside of man and entails a process of domestication of one’s ego instincts. He further suggests that since older people are turned inwards rather than outwards, therefore “it is the privilege and task of the riper age that has passed the meridian of life, to produce culture” (Jacobi, 1953).

A core Jungian concept on the second half of life is the notion of transcendence which is “a sense of wonder, an intimation of a grand design to our life, and an awareness of and striving to embrace what is truly spiritual” (Conforti, 2014). Thus, according to Jung, the notion of successful aging entails transcendence in terms of development of a relationship to the sacred over and beyond the profane ego and consciousness. During this sacred time, “we enter a preformed realm of the psyche, whose rites of passage and initiatives suddenly grip us and shape our life” (Hollis, 1993). As one grows old there is an ever increasing need to let go of what’s no longer graspable rather than blindly running in its pursuit. Thus, successful aging from a Jungian perspective is but a rite of passage, as those conducted by native people all over the world to mark a person’s transition from one phase of life to another.

The Aging Women

There is no debate over the fact that the inner psychic life of females is much different from that of men, and while a general definition of the unconscious might be feasible, a generic list of its contents is not. Jung himself talks about the feminine as “not simply regressive” and asserting that it “can act in a forward-looking, consciousness-producing way” (Doughlas, 2006). The feminine appears on one hand in the males as a guiding figure and on the other it retains its essentiality in the female psyche as a torch bearer for the individuation journey. There can be no universally laid down rules that pre-define what the unconscious material would be or how it

would manifest in the waking life of individuals. Since, the second half of life entails a realization of and turning towards the inner unconscious realm, it is postulated that deciphering the pattern of the female unconscious can throw some light on the aging process of women by possibly suggesting aspects of their unconscious that need to be tuned into.

Jane Wheelwright (1987) suggest that a review of the work done by Dr. Jung on aging suggests that there are seven essential tasks that are a pre-requisite for someone who is growing old. The first task is facing the reality of aging and dying which entails a graceful acceptance of the fact that one is gradually getting on with years and no amount of fear can turn away the impending death. The second task prescribed by the author entails a review of life wherein one looks back, preferably with fondness, at what one has managed to achieve throughout life and to arrive at a reconciliation of the sweet and the sour. The third task of aging is defining life realistically which points out the development of a holistic awareness of one's life in terms of one's achievements, successes as well as failures without any undue emphasis on either of them. Conforti (2014) resonates a similar idea wherein he suggests that one needs to accept not only what one has been able to achieve well but to also accept with equal dignity all that one has been forced to leave behind and would not achieve fruition. In the fourth task of aging, it is mandatory that one lets go of one's ego and thereby moves away from the initial biological aim of life to accept with open arms the cultural aim of one's life. This task is followed by the task of finding a new rooting in the Self, which is the fifth task. The sixth task entails determining the meaning of one's life in terms of what lies inside of them rather than what shines bright on the outside. The last task prescribed for aging is rebirth and dying with life. Jung suggests that many religions prescribe to men an idea of rebirth to ensure that they live the second half of life with an aim to be reached, for, a life with no aim has no meaning for man. Thus, to be able to successfully age, men (and women) must utilize the period of second half of life as a renewal of life's primitive energies and live with much passion towards a changed goal and not succumb to the fantasy of sticking to the old goals which no longer hold meaning or value in the second half.

The process of turning old becomes peculiar for females for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the society today, more than ever is experiencing a decline in religious institutions which have traditionally always been the support for people who are transitioning into their old age. For women, this decline hits even harder since they are the ones who have been more dependent on

such religious institutions. Secondly, specifically in the West people have become increasingly more alienated from Nature. This necessitates a gradual shift away from the cycles of nature and its principles that guide one into the knowledge of their own bodily rhythms. The bodies of females and more closely attuned to nature and a shift away from actual nature moves women away from their own inner psychological rhythms declining them of the ability to accept courses of life more naturally. Men on the other hand do not live in such close connection to nature and are therefore slightly less influenced by this movement away from nature. Lastly, the culture is becoming increasingly more fixated on the materialistic body and for women the connection to their bodies is of vital importance. The more they are forced to move away from their body and the more they are forced to morph and feel ashamed of their bodily needs, the more problematic it becomes for the women to gracefully transition into the decline of the body during the ripper years.

Jungians call the process of growing into one's true self as the journey of individuation, or of becoming an individual in the true and unique sense.. As pointed out by Jung and elaborated upon by Doughlas (2006), "a woman is much more likely to be involved in a *nekiya*, a descent into the underworld, than a heroic fight with the dragon". Men are faced with a task of entering the social world with valor and conquering the tasks set forth in front of them and it is mandatory for them to make these conquests to be able to feel worthy and justified in their existence. But for a woman, the task is not to fight the external demons but to conquer the ones latent within her own psyche. A woman's way and of development has no counterpart in the psyche of the male, since the two are complementary but cannot coincide. Growing old is a process also of initiation which is a "mystical process of spiritual transformation in which the initiate suffers a symbolic death and is reborn into a more sacred Self" (Greco, 1983). The purpose of this transformation is "ontological transmutation" or a passage into a more spiritual realm of life where one becomes more closely entangled with the sacred as regards the profane.

Archetypes and Aging in Women

Dr. Jung discusses at length about the great influence that mothers have in lives of their children. Subsequently, he uncovers and discusses the notion of what he terms as the "mother archetype". He defines this archetype as the "prototype or primordial image of the mother that is pre-existent and supraordinate to all phenomena in which the "maternal", in the broadest sense is

manifest” (Jung, 1970). What fosters the various aspects of this archetype is first and foremost one’s individual experiences with one’s mother and grandmother, step mother or mother-in-law and then secondly one’s experiences with the figurative mothers such as the goddesses in one’s culture. The symbols used to denote the mother range from the cave, rock, ploughed field and garden to one’s university, place of worship and so on. Sometimes animals like the cow or the hare also symbolize the mother. All such symbols have both a positive as well as a negative connotation to them, depicting the age-old fact that on one hand mother and motherhood are associated with positive attributes like helpfulness, fertility, care and nourishment, compassion and so on, and on the other in a rather striking contrast the mother also stands for negative characteristics like hidden secrets, darkness, ambivalence, seduction, poison and death.

Jung suggests the presence of the unconscious feminine anima in both men and women (as opposed to unconscious masculine which is found only in women). This unconscious feminine in female psyche is termed as the Kore who is generally understood as the bipolar or the dual occurrence in the personality of the female which makes up for her supraordinate personality. That is, the part of her personality that has an existence and presence larger than that of her immediate self. The Kore functions at an archetypal, rather than a personal level for the females and is that force in the psyche that prompts her towards psychic and spiritual maturity and assists her process of individuation and development of the consciousness, especially as the woman ages. She is both the mother and the maiden in the psyche of the female and often appears in the dreams of the females as the unknown young girl, the unmarried mother, the dancer, the nixie or the water sprite with a fishtail that gives away her super human nature. The mother aspect has already been detailed above. The maiden aspect of the Kore is not always human and is generally of an unknown or peculiar origin. She undergoes strange experiences which give away her myth like nature. The Kore, thus, has both human and non human attributes ascribed to her and displays opposing yet compelling tendencies that make it quintessential for anyone dealing with a female to acknowledge this aspect of her psyche. The two archetypal aspects of the feminine consciousness are thus that of motherhood as well as maidenhood.

Jung discusses the Homeric hymn of Demeter and Persephone as the primary example of the archetype and psychology of the Kore. This story of the mother and daughter is the prototype of the Kore archetype. Jung highlights the need and importance of the daughter turning away

from the mother in order to achieve individuation and grow successfully into her own true being rather than being a specter of the mother. In his work, Makowski (1985) uses the tale of Demeter to explain that a woman can achieve psychological and spiritual maturity only when she moves away psychologically from the mother and begins to discover her individual identity. It is posited, thus, that for women successful aging calls for a movement away from the psychological mother and development and nurturance of the duality inherent within her own being.

According to Jung, Demeter and Kore, the mother and daughter aspect, extend the feminine psyche both upwards and downwards adding a duality to the feminine psyche. This duality can be summed into being the “older and younger” and the “stronger and weaker” aspects of the psyche. This duality of the psyche is a pre-existent condition for the female personality in as much as it becomes absolutely and critically essential for a female to realize, accept and enliven this inherent duality in her with much reverence. And since this duality exists on the plane of mother-daughter experience which is of course alien to a man, it shuts him out and makes it rather tedious for a man to understand a woman’s growing complexity as she ages. A female contains thus both the mother and the daughter aspects within her psyche. Jung (2003) suggests that “every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter”. He further also suggests that such a participation and intermingling of duality within her psyche causes a woman to live “earlier as a mother and later as a daughter”. Thus, from a psychological perspective, every woman contains within herself both the mother and the daughter either literally or metaphorically and this is dependent also upon her stage in development. Thus, to age well and to age gracefully a woman has to acknowledge her place both as the mother and the daughter. And it is a well known psychological fact that the undernourishment of any aspect of the Self is bound to cause serious impairments to the psychological functioning of an individual. Thus, it is extremely psychologically damaging for a woman to be either eternally the mother or be the ageless daughter. For her to gain a fuller existence what is essential is to accept and acknowledge the inner duality and feed both aspects of her psyche equally well, else it would be immensely psychologically damaging to her.

Mythology of a culture is the best source of understanding the presence and manifestation of the archetypal intent within the culture. Therefore, a look at the Indian mythology is

absolutely essential in order to understand the Kore element and its manifestation in the Indian culture. One of the Goddesses in Indian mythology that remains a perfect example of the duality of the feminine is Goddess Kali. There are several accounts of her origin within Indian mythology.

Her name comes from the Sanskrit root word “Kal” which means time. And time which is all consuming is the most appropriate description of the Goddess. For, she is the manifestation of adi-shakti, or the divine feminine principle itself. Among the several accounts of her emergence the earliest one accounts her emergence from the great goddess Durga who is attacked by demons Chanda and Mundaka. Durga responds with such anger and ferocity that her face turns dark and Goddess Kali emerges out of her forehead, black and gaunt with sunken eyes and wearing a garland of human skulls as well as tiger skin. Her dark color is symbolic of the womb of creation into which all will eventually dissolve. She is ferocious and destroys the two demons almost immediately. Later in same battle, she is responsible for killing the demon Raktabija, who until then is rendered undefeatable by the boon he received of producing more demons with every drop of his blood that reaches the ground. Other origin stories involve Parvati being called upon by Lord Shiva to kill demon Daruka who had received a boon that he could be killed only by a female and so Goddess Kali is summoned to achieve this feat. Legends recount that once born, Goddess Kali went wild and ate all demons she came across, and stringing their heads on a chain she wore around her neck.

Goddess Kali, a mind born of the adi-shakti, first in the form of Goddess Durga and later from Goddess Parvati, embodies the duality mother and maiden aspect. Like a mother, she is benevolent and protective towards her children. This maternal aspect of the Goddess is also recounted in a tale where Lord Shiva is sent in the form of a little crying infant to the battle field where the Goddess is madly dancing with fury and ecstasy of being drunk on the blood of the demons she has slain. Seeing the young helpless baby all the fury of the Goddess comes to an immediate end and she ceases to dance. She cradles the baby in her arms to pacify him and breastfeeds the baby. The rocking and feeding of the baby is a manifestation of the maternal instinct of the Goddess. Even in the midst of her fury, all it takes for her to abandon her wrath is the presence of a small helpless infant who is enough to evoke her compassion. Though most often seen as an embodiment of the “terrible mother” who indulges in ceaseless violence and

death and destruction, Kali is also benevolent and compassionate. Though often depicted as a mother, Goddess Kali also embodies sexuality and sexual energy, which is the reason why she is worshiped in the Tantric cult. Her sexuality however, is always directed towards her husband, Lord Shiva.

Ancient Hindu texts use the name Tara alternately with Goddess Kali. In Buddhist texts where Goddess Tara is worshipped extensively and reverently, she is shown to have various manifestations. The three main colors symbolic of her various manifestations being green, white and red (Doughlas, 2006). The color green represents her close connection to land and fertility, connecting the Goddess closely to nature and the “earthly round of existence”. She is symbolic of wisdom and ease and destroys what needs to be destroyed, protecting her children from danger and evil. In her white manifestation, she is the moon-goddess who symbolizes health and life. With a compassionate nature, she is intensely aware of the suffering in the world and is available to all those who call upon her, be it sinners or virtuous people. The color white is associated primarily with light purity, innocence and often virginity. White represents purity and cleanliness as well as a new beginning of things. Goddess Tara is often depicted also in a red form with a lion symbolizing her aggressive, furious and dynamic nature. The color red is a warm and positive color associated most often with sexuality and survival instincts. An energizing color, red is symbolic love, creation, appetite, determination and leadership. Thus in her various manifestations Goddess Tara lives out both her virginity and her unbridled sexual energy. She is the protective mother as well as the sexual maiden, just like her manifestation of Kali.

The individual female’s task for successful aging is therefore to realize her inner maiden and her inner mother. For, even the age-old epics bear witness to the fact that women living a solely one-sided life shall be denied entry into the heaven, symbolically, psychological satiation and a state of perfect happiness. Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik (2000) in his work on the manifestations of the feminine goddess in India narrates a myth from Mahabharata of the daughter of sage Kunigarga who performed austerities but was still refused entry into heaven until she fulfilled her biological duty of uniting with a male only after which she is considered worthy of living in heaven.

For a woman, the body remains her first connection to the nature and it is the body that links her material nature to her spiritual nature. Thus, for a woman to reach the psychological heaven within her profane existence, it is absolutely essential that she cares for and nurtures her body well and listens well to its rhythms and songs. It is only when the woman tends to her body that she can turn inward to nurture her long-injured psyche, the injuries resulting from years and years of, psychological and social neglect. It is only when a woman fulfils the aims of her material body and turns inwards to reconcile the Demeter Kore inside of her psyche, that she will be allowed an entry into heaven. Within the human psyche, the heaven is a symbol of restoration of faith, optimism and hope, all of which are absolutely essential for not only a mere survival but a healthy thriving of the (old) woman.

Conclusion

Successful aging from a Jungian point of view necessitates the fulfillment of the biological aim of the first half of life before entering into the cultural aim of the second half of life. Because males and females are different from each other not only in terms of their physical bodies but also in terms of their psychological make-up as well as the social demands placed upon them, it is only logical to assert that the process of aging is different for both men and women. The tasks for females if they wish to age gracefully is the acceptance of the inherent duality and to gain first and foremost an individuation from their own biological mothers and withdraw any latent projections on to the mother archetype and thereafter reclaim these projected aspects as valuable parts of their own psyche.

While in the western context, Demeter and the Kore are apt exemplar models of the feminine individuation, in the east, goddess Kali and Goddess Tara with their seemingly contradictory manifestations present a truer picture of the feminine model of individuation. One needs to hold on to the hope of the younger days and to its wisdom and wonder but one must also learn to let go of that which remained unfulfilled and could not be realized. Successful aging will therefore constitute an acceptance of both the realized aspects of one's life as well and the unfulfilled aspects. The task for the aging woman is to break away from the mother complex, realize the inherent duality in herself to the maximum possible extent, live out her life as both the daughter

and the mother without binding herself too stringently to any one role and to stop wanting to be everything to everyone, and even herself all the time and thus be able also:

“To walk in the brilliant clear light of these autumn days knowing what could have been, and what exists as potential, while realizing that there is a piece of life, an aspect of psyche, that will not be ours” (Conforti, 2014)

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