

Antonella Riem Natale

Anita Desai's Baumgartner and the Goddess Mother

Abstract I: This essay works within the focus of ecofeminist epistemologies as part of an international research project on the theme of *partnership* and the Goddess archetype as a figure of the sacred. As our perspective of the origins of humanity affects our beliefs, political and social behaviour in contemporary culture, we analyse the meaningful episode in Anita Desai's novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) when the protagonist enters in a cave/temple in the Indian countryside, showing the importance of the representation of the Mother of the Caves, one of the most ancient emanations of the Hindu Kali, a *matrikadevi* (mother Goddess), called *Kurukulla*.

Abstract II: Dal momento che le nostre prospettive rispetto all'origine dell'umanità condizionano i nostri credo politici, culturali e sociali, il saggio, parte di una ricerca internazionale sulla *partnership* e l'archetipo della Grande Dea come figura del sacro, analizza un episodio significativo nel romanzo di Anita Desai *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), in cui il protagonista entra in una caverna/tempio nella campagna indiana. Questo dimostra quanto sia importante la rappresentazione della Dea Madre delle Caverne, una della più antiche emanazioni della Kali Indù, una *matrikadevi* (dea madre) chiamata *Kurukulla*.

This essay works within the focus of ecofeminist epistemologies (Devlin-Glass, & McCreddon, 2001; Adams 1993) as part of an international research project on the theme of *partnership* and the Goddess archetype as a figure of the sacred, in some texts in the literatures both of the English 'canon' and the postcolonial voice of *englishes* (1). Among many others, in particular the following anthropological and psychoanalytical works are the theoretical foundation of this study:

1. Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), which traces the cultural evolution of Western societies from prehistory to the present, in terms of the underlying tension between "equalitarian" (2) and "dominator" modes of living. The 'lost age' belonging to the Goddess is an important legacy that we must recuperate in order to face and peacefully overcome the challenges of our times. Riane Eisler's *Sacred Pleasure* (1996), which focuses on the biological rewards for loving and caring behaviours, representing "a more evolved way of living on this earth" (3). She explains, giving full scientific evidence and relevant bibliography to prove her 'case', that the 'war of the sexes' and violent behaviours on the 'other' are not genetically, biologically or *divinely*, ordained; they are indeed a social and cultural means used by a certain type of power through the ages to *divide et impera*. The partnership model shows how a better system of governing in cooperation can be fruitfully used for the ultimate good of all.
2. Clarissa Pinkola Estés's *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1992), a Jungian study on the figure of the "Wild Woman". Estés creates a new lexicon to describe the feminine psyche; she uses multicultural myths, fairy tales, stories, and folk tales in order to trace the hidden history of women through this archetype. The "woman who runs with the wolves" is a *natural* creature and a powerful symbol, filled with positive inner forces and instincts, passionate intelligence and visionary creativity, magic and 'medicine'.
3. Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman. A New Psychology of Women* (1984) studies Greek Goddesses and their representations as powerful inner patterns – or archetypes, governing our lives. Using these archetypal elemental forces consciously is a means to counteract the patriarchal cultural stereotypes that still have a powerful effect both on our inner and outer worlds. This is also a reassuring alternative to the restrictive dichotomies often governing our modes of being and relating to others, such as masculine/feminine, mother/lover, doctor/healer, careerist/housewife, physical/spiritual.

These works analyse our archaeological past, especially in Neolithic times, when a *partnership* culture, rather than a *dominator* or patriarchal one, was taking "care" of the world, in Çatal Hüyük, Anatolia, in what Marija Gimbutas (1974, 1982, 1982, 1991) called "Ancient or Neolithic Europe", before the invasion of nomadic Indo-European tribes; and in Crete. According to these and other authors (4), in our genetic system we have memories of this past harmonious relationship with the "Other" and the "Earth-Female", which, in a spiral and recurring fashion, tend to re-present an alternative solution to our world's crisis and to the new millennium. A process of disenthronement and degradation of the Great Goddess, who was first subdivided into a myriad minor goddesses, always tied and submitted to a male partner or husband, began with Indo-European invasions and was later completed by the insurgence of monotheistic religions, Hebrew, Christian and Moslem. The male deity became dominant and the female goddesses faded into the background if not into a sort of limbo

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bordering oblivion (Bolen 1984: 18-21). For the first time, rape appeared in myths, and male heroes killed serpents and dragons, the old *familiar* animals, symbols of the Goddess power and energy (Bolen 1984: 21). Merlin Stone notes: “we may find ourselves wondering to what degree the suppression of women's *rites* has actually been the suppression of women's *rights*” (Stone 1978: 228, emphasis added). Rather than the Goddess's care of Her children and the world, where all forms and manifestations danced together in a mystic harmony, the focus was moved to God's *rule* and subdivision between opposite forces and moral values: those who *belong* to a certain community, religion, caste, race, are friends to be protected with all means, as long as they are loyal, and obey and observe the Father's law: those who do not are only sub-human enemies to be colonised, conquered and subdued or destroyed.

This dualism centred on Logos, typical of the patriarchal voice, is held together by the binary opposition of masculine reason and feminine nature-instinct. Indeed, systematic ordering and classification is specifically characterised by the rejection of all ‘inappropriate’ or ‘undesired’ elements; sharpening distinctions and difference is a way of defining traditional patriarchal familiar and political roles. There is always a critically important relation between history, politics and ontology; if we keep in mind the fundamental transformation of our ancient *gylanic* (5) societies from a paradigm focussed on “woman, the creator and sharer of food” to one of “man the territorial possessor-aggressor”, our vision of what is natural and part of our biological, emotional and psychological response changes radically. Our perspective of the origins of humanity affects our beliefs, political and social behaviour in contemporary culture. Ardrey's perspective of man-the-killer becomes the philosophical foundation and justification for our globalised, authoritarian and technologically managed society (1961 and 1966). A new global scientific élite determines who is the fittest, who needs to move forward or is on the way to extinction. If we agree with Glyn Isaacs view – and Darwin's (Loye 2003: 67-96) – that food-sharing is the primordial act that renders us truly human, then we can show compassion and freely share our goods with our fellow human beings (Sjoo & Mor 1987: 391-409; Thompson 1981: 258-61).

Anita Desai's fiction is characterised by her very capacity to listen to the modulations of each voice and to represent both Ardrey's prevailing perspective of man-the-killer and Isaacs' view, connected to the Great Mother. She can repeat rhythms, echo words and worlds that often may seem distant and different to the Western reader, that are often misinterpreted according to a patriarchal and dominant mode. In the craftsman's shop direct experience, observation in the field, the imitation and repetition of each gesture, action and movement, amplify the apprentice's perception and his/her ability to do. Thus, the selfsame interlacing of cultures, languages and traditions that marks Anita Desai's biography becomes the bridging and contact element among the multifarious visions she presents in her narrative.

In the case of *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) the representation of the Goddess Mother is underlined through Her *absence*. As Anita Desai says: “the female

body has always been crucial to the reproduction of Empire, and deeply marked by it" (Griffith 1996).

Hugo Baumgartner, a German Jew, flees to Bombay to escape the Holocaust, leaving his mother and *mother-homeland* behind, in order to rebuild a new life in India. However, his mother and his homeland, exactly because absent and abandoned, remain the principal if not the only counterpoint to his squalid life of exile and outsider, *firanghi*, unwanted. In constructing his own myth of India, Hugo repeats the typical procedure of the coloniser, who projects his own expectations, whether it be mythical and paradisiacal or infernal and demoniacal, and builds an image for himself of the territories he conquers and which he appropriates. From the Paradise Hugo imagines to the hell of Bombay the distance is short. Yet Hugo is not a coloniser; actually he has been colonised, violated and inwardly destroyed by the same appropriative ferocity used against the *natives* of any subjugated place. However, focussing on the contradictions and ambivalences of his narration we are able to read what has been excluded and repressed, that is the Mother figure (6).

In *Baumgartner's Bombay* Anita Desai interrogates the common patriarchal vision/perception of the maternal/sensual body of woman/earth, that must be controlled, dominated and repressed for it is both source of life *and* death in the linear representation of finite time of the patriarchal/dominant mode. A meaningful episode in this sense is the moment when Hugo enters into a cave in the Indian countryside, according to some scholars ironic re-reading or writing back to the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*, even if Desai is very appreciative of Forster's novel, especially for its sincere and open portrayal of the relationships between whites and Indians.

The place on the top of the hill, where there are "rocks plied [...] to form a kind of cave" (188) is immediately *defined* by Hugo: it is not one of the many temples of "famed carvings and fabulous idols such as heaped the country with their artistic splendour" (188). The narrating voice repeats here the aggressive potency of the colonial paradigm that *de-fines*, marks the contours, interprets everything according to its own vision and principles. The seemingly positive terms that characterise other places of cult in India (famed, fabulous, splendour) have as a strongly contrastive counterpoint in the substantive *idols*, not divinities or gods, but mere fetishes of a childish, superstitious, primitive people who believe in polytheism, as often mistakenly Hinduism is read, not knowing the metaphysical heights of monotheist religions. The verb heaped, moreover, indicates a multiformity and excess that nauseate the *foreign* visitor, for they are irreconcilable with his desire of rigour, form, linearity, clarity and definition.

However, according to Hugo this is somehow a temple, even if he is not completely sure, because he misses all the reference points that characterise a place of cult in the Western patriarchal world. It is a "probably nameless" temple, and this absence of a name identifies the incapability or impossibility of the coloniser to actually *name* and thus comprehend what is *other*: it is the inadequacy of colonial language in de-scribing what it sees and experiments in the colonised country, if not according to its own terms and criteria. The cave in

the West is the dark place par excellence, it symbolises the descent to Hell, necessary to the hero in order to ascend to the high spiritual spheres and detach himself from matter/mother, dirty, obscure and sinful. In the ancient Goddess cults, instead, that Desai reminds us through absence and in an elliptical way, the cave is the archetype of the belly, cosmic womb, spring of life and regeneration, where everything is sown, grows and dies, in the tripartite cyclicity of the Goddess's time, in contrast with the duality of God the Father. The Hindu Mother of the Caves was one of the most ancient emanations of Kali, a *matrikadevi* (mother Goddess), called *Kurukulla* (7).

Hugo enters the cave as an intruder in a sacred place, who, with a judging mind, full of categories and prejudices, weighs and decides. He fears bats, nocturnal animals connected to the Goddess for their capacity to orientate in the darkness of the worlds defined infernal by patriarchal culture, which are instead places of regeneration and preparation for birth or rebirth. For the same reason Hugo fears obscurity, associated to primigenial chaos, where everything originates, but more than anything he fears blood, which he imagines was spilled in cannibalistic rites, another patriarchal perversion of the Goddess's spirituality and rites when only the priestesses' menstrual blood was used. Only later, when patriarchal male priests seized religious power, menstrual blood was substituted with animal and in some cases human blood. The ritual use of blood still remains, totally purged and *spiritualised* in the Eucharist, where we drink the purifying blood of Christ, who sacrificed for us, rather obvious transformation and appropriation, even if ferociously denied, as feminist criticism clearly shows, of the death and dismemberment of the son/lover of the Great Goddess of ancient cults (think of Isis and Osiris).

This is why in many caverns of the whole world we find red marks, often in ochre, "red powder or paste" (189); these signs, indicating the way out of the cave to Hugo, are ancestral motives, they speak of the Goddess's secret, but there is no one to explain it to him: "no priests, no pilgrim. No voice, no song, not even a dim inscription scratched into the black fur that coated the stones" (189). Nothing gives him the possibility to imprison his experience and the place in a logic-rational language, unable to contain them. Only silence, the magic and poetic word can do this, through allusion, analogy and imagination. This creative modality is precluded to Hugo, who cannot understand anything, even when using words he does not know, like "tantric magic" (190). Tantra is a most ancient spiritual science, based on the sacredness of sexuality, on initiation and realisation of the divine through the sexual act, which all monotheistic religions consider the lowest and most debasing and animal, the furthest from the purity of Spirit. Tantra, like Tao, or like alchemy in the West, recognizes in the physical body, in the form, a manifestation and a vibration (*spanda*) of what is divine and Real. Pleasure is not a sin, but it is part of the glorious dance of life, where worlds are created and dissolved in the Great Goddess's sacred breath, where masculine and feminine joyously donate each other and melt in the beatitude of Divine Being. This is why the cave-womb of the mother/lover/Goddess can only "[spit] him out" (190), throw the intruder out, send him back to his banal

and worn out world, made of solitude and sad commerce, “on the fringe” of life, beauty and Truth.

Hugo Baumgartner had to endure the violence of patriarchal culture and was contaminated by it. He seems to linger on the threshold of otherness, he does not let go and dive into the Great Mother’s waters, beyond Maya’s veil, the great *craftwoman* of the cosmic web. Or may be it is the absurdity of his death that finally and totally frees him, transmuted into the crystalline light of the Great Goddess, lulled in Her luminescent and pregnant obscurity.

Anita Desai, perfect sonar, does not miss a single beat in the circular motion of Life/Death/Regeneration, nothing is left behind; in her narrative she creates a continuum, a “luminous halo enveloping us from beginning to end”. Her words proceed from the necessity to rend the mask of “reality”: Desai has an acute sense of the poetry of things, she knows how to look at them closely and in perspective, for the point of support on which small things live is mystery, that breath dwelling in us and animating us.

NOTES:

1. The research project on Partnership Literature, which I coordinate, involves the following institutions: the Universities of Udine, Milano, Lecce (Italy), Bangalore and Mysore (India), and the Centre for Partnership Studies (California).
2. Eisler prefers the term “equalitarian” instead of “egalitarian” because the former indicates social relations within a “mutual” society, where both men and women have “equal” importance, while the latter was traditionally used to indicate equality only among men (see note 10 to the Introduction).
3. Eisler, 2000, 71: “Scientists are today finding that our bodies are equipped with the capacity to release powerful chemicals when we engage in caring and care-taking behaviours—chemicals that reward these activities by making us feel good”.
4. For further bibliography see Riem: October-December 2003 “Partnership and the Goddess’s Charade”, *The Atlantic Literary Review*, 4/4: 110-131; notes 4, 5 and 6: 126-7.
5. In her fundamental work (1987: 105-6), anthropologist and scholar Riane Eisler coins the word gylany, composed by gy- (prefix for woman, from the ancient Greek Gyné) and an- (from the ancient Greek Anèr) united by l (lyen, to tie, to put together). She uses gylany to describe these ancient societies where there was no hierarchy, no sexism, no class-system or great economic disparities. Their cultural system was highly complex, using linear language, sophisticated painting and sculpting techniques, and a “modern” architecture.
6. See: Chantal Soeters, “Representation of Mother/Land in Anita Desai’s Baumgartner’s Bombay”, *The Atlantic Literary Review*, 4/4 (October-December 2003): 20-33, on p. 23: “In this novel Desai shows that is the

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figure of the mother that is repressed in the construction of Hugo's imagined reality. [...] she translates [the mother's] silence into meaningful presence”.

7. Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology, London, Hamlyn, 1968, p. 359.

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The following are useful links to further explore the idea of partnership, ecofeminism and the Goddess:

<http://www.partnershipway.org>

<http://www.let.uu.nl/~Rosi.Braidotti/personal/>

<http://www.ecoliteracy.org/>

<http://www.fritjofcapra.net/>

<http://www.schumachercollege.org.uk/index.html>

<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/thewomenslibrary/>

<http://www.pantheon.org/mythica.html>

http://www.thewildhunt.com/thegreen/myth_general_misc.shtml

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goddess>

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