

Women, Body and Knowledge

- Issues in Epistemology and their Implications For Women in the Third World

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It is in the field of health - 'mental'/physical - that epistemological issues have a vivid and clearly discernible impact. Seemingly, philosophical abstractions become in this area literally matters of life and death, sickness and well being. It is especially in the field of mental health that cultural conceptions of knowledge can be examined for their implications on not only the Third World generally, but particularly on women (including women in the West).

Foucault's writings on *Madness and Civilization* illustrate the links between a society's system of power interlocked with its idea of reason and what constitutes psychopathology. While this is an important shift in the modernist paradigm, its nihilism cannot be considered salutary, and indeed, while welcoming such a postmodern analysis, one is still left with the *fact* of psychopathology: Whether we call it the "system" or "society", something now "out there", is still sick.

If one aspect of the problem is the Cartesian mind/body and its legacy of locating human consciousness in brain functioning, then an alternative conception comes from the idea that epistemology is part of the human psychological imagination. Such a perspective is structured around the works of Eliade, Durand, Jung, Corbin, Cassirer, Campbell and Hillman and goes under the title of Archetypal Theory. Its roots are interdisciplinary and it can be considered a style of thinking and revisionist engagement on many fronts - education, therapy, medicine, literary criticism, philosophy and the material world of science. Assembling and

lending its terms and viewpoints to a variety of intellectual concerns, it seeks to draw individuals from diverse geographical and intellectual areas into rapport with each other for the re-visioning of their ideas and their worlds.

A Case History of Modern Psychology

Anthropologists know the place and value of story telling and in fact the clinical notion of "case-history" in psychology and medicine is an archetypal idea in which this human compulsion for narrative is evident. The mythologies found in almost every culture can be considered traditional models of the enormous diversity of the human psyche. What are seen as irrational stories by the modern mind are in fact different *styles of consciousness*, each uniquely *embodied* and suggesting different *attitudes/perspectives* to life, events, knowledge and relationships. Mythology is also a more accurate depiction of human consciousness as it is *experience* in which different gods/goddesses (emotions/perspectives) ebb and flow in a recursive manner, rather than a linear scheme.

The story of modern western consciousness began in the Mediterranean regions of the Great Mother goddess and a matrix of multiplicity and fecundity. That diverse pantheon was gradually overshadowed by the exclusively male hero myths and their epic battles towards light, hight and the establishing of Law/Rulership. The Judeo Christian tradition strengthened this steady overwhelming of the feminine aspect and within two thousand years culminated in Northern Germany and its heroic Protestant Ethic.

The Myth of the Hero

The story of the hero is a universal one. It can be found in legends, myths and stories the world over and its myriad variations notwithstanding, certain themes remain common. Typically, it is a story describing the birth of a boy in unusual circumstances where he is for example, missing a parent, or is the long awaited child of a royal couple, or perhaps born in a very humble situation. The child is raised under conditions of ever present danger and frequently exhibits early proof of superhuman powers. There follows a difficult journey or quest for treasure, or perhaps a special mission which brings him to a position of prominence. This stage involves a series of confrontation with a range of frighten-

ing forces and culminates in the hero's eventual victory and his being acknowledged as a ruler, unifier, redeemer and giver of laws. For some time after this all is well until his final fall when death comes about either through loss of favour with gods or men, his fallibility to the sin of pride (hybris), from a betrayal, or from a heroic self-sacrifice. Some better known examples of this hero figure are those of Perseus, Hercules, Oedipus, King Arthur, Ulysses, Mithras, Siegfried, Samson, Achilles, Prometheus, Superman and Rambo (it is perhaps reflective of the age that modern figures like the last two refuse to undergo any final decline and fall).

The archetypal story of the hero has been interpreted as an account of the development of consciousness, especially in the earlier stages of adulthood. The initiation rituals and rites of passage in "primitive" cultures can be seen as preparatory enactment of this attitude which is required for the process of separation from familial protection and of a symbolic death leading to a rebirth as member of the adult community. The myth of the hero can also be understood as the emergence of the faculties of will and reason. Tales of the heroes emphasize these two qualities required for victory. Frequently it is a violent experience during which he must undergo enormous tests of physical endurance. Similarly, he must plan complicated campaigns and carefully calculate his route to survival and eventual triumph. Tortuous initiation rites which test the initiate's capacity to survive under difficult circumstances reflect this psychic process of the development of the powers of will and reason reinforcing the sense of the hero as a progressively improved and elevated human being.

In depth psychology, as Hillman points out, 'the hero archetype (or imaginative pattern) appears not so much as a list of contents as it does in maintaining a heroic attitude towards all events'. The heroic at a collective level, resounds with grandeur in such a way, that the rule, rank and privilege it implies grips the masses so that they identify with it and serve it unquestioningly. Thus the German and Russian people thought of themselves as part of a heroic ideal even while they were being dispatched towards death in great numbers by their increasingly cynical political leaders. Archetypal heroes of various kinds function in our societies today in a normative role, such as film stars or sportsmen.

The story of the hero is just one among numerous archetypes and is instrumental in bringing into consciousness the interplay between individual achievement, human limitation, and the need to belong to a social group. It is symbolic of social process of sep-

aration from individual and familial unity towards inclusion in a larger collective unity. Our acknowledgement of it is very important but it is also important to remember that it is essentially an *adolescent* archetype. Taken to the exclusion of other archetypes - and its principles encourage exclusion - it can prevent the unfolding and maturing of consciousness. For this reason it is frequently referred to as the myth of the child-hero.

The Ascent of the Hero and Ego-Consciousness

Psychiatry emerged as a teachable speciality by the beginning of the Nineteenth Century and partly due to Gutenberg, the German rhetoric became the principal vehicle of psychological expression. Significantly, the foundations of this youngest of the medical sciences were to an extraordinary extent also the inventions of *young* males, mostly under the age of thirty.

By the end of the Nineteenth Century, consciousness had been defined and fixed against the negative unknown of the "unconscious" within a linear scheme of movement from below to above (progress). All unfamiliar phenomena, that is, those not explainable to the ego of will and reason, were seen as belonging "down there" in the realm of the unconscious and potentially "pathological". As Jung said, the gods had become diseases.

The cultural locus of this ascension of a heroic and monotheistic consciousness over a fundamentally multiple and diverse sense of personality can said to be a movement from South to North. Thus one can say that "South" is both an ethnic, cultural, geographical place and also a symbolic one. It is the Mediterranean culture with its images and textual sources, its sensuality and myths, its tragic and picaresque genres, and its stress on the feminine and cyclical nature of life. But the relentless upward march of the hero gradually overshadowed the diverse and feminine, till for example Zeus - who was just one of the Olympians - finally merged into the monotheistic ideal associated with light, height and Law.

The history of psychiatry/psychology can be considered a sort of grand finale to the total enthronement of a masculine, heroic, monotheistic view of "ego" and "consciousness" to the extent that they can be considered synonymous. Its formulation was that "I" = mind = consciousness = brain, which in turn was essentially Aryan, Apollonic, Germanic, positivistic, rational and Cartesian, in sum, heroic/monotheistic in which there is no space for any-

thing feminine, "intermediate, ambiguous, metaphorical". Two of the earliest "pathologies" to be detected and which most gripped the popular imagination were "hysteria" and "multiple personality" or "schizophrenia". The former was and still is considered an exclusively female condition. The latter today has myriad variations and concomitant drugs for its treatment.

The Freudian Ego and Civilization

Time magazine has called Freud's ideas "universal common knowledge". We think of ourselves in Freudian terms of id, ego and superego. Most therapies are ego-oriented seeking to unveil, expose and "integrate" unconscious forces. The attitude towards the unconscious is one of suspicion and conquest through reason and will power. This ideal of consciousness is part of the Darwinian idea of evolution of dominant over recessive, of an upward progress and part of an imperial scientific and colonial world view. The id is something to be tamed, taken over and colonized. The task of analysis according to Freud is

to strengthen the ego, to make it independent of the superego, to widen the field of perception and enlarge its organization. Where id is there ego shall be. It is a work of culture.

Thus anything that is different from the ego, is seen as anti-social and/or anti-cultural.

We see this model today in the idea of a strong center in the state, and in medicine. And what is happening in the "post modern" world - the fragmentation and assertion of diversity - is in fact already visible in psychology, which has presently more than 300 schools of therapy.

In sum: What we call consciousness today is in fact an exceedingly narrow vision primarily focused on the outer material world. Even there, its consequences are evident, witness the environment. Similarly all women must aspire to what is essentially a Western male construction of what constitutes a desirable criterion: Whether in development, progress or health, no other interpretations based on different experiences are considered valid. The only value is on reason, power and "hard" facts. It is all rather phallic, as perhaps it must be when one keeps in mind that the hero myth is an adolescent one, an age when the sexual impulse

is at its peak in males. The metaphors of science reflect this impulse of power, dominance and/or male sexuality.

"South", then, is not simply "out there", but within as the "unconscious". Psychologically, it is those areas, emotions, experiences, perspectives, which are (a) different from the (masculine) ego and its emphasis on power and rationality, (b) this includes not only other cultures, but women as a whole, whether North or South. South is the (soft) body, which needs to be ruled (or denied) by the (hard) head. South is Nature, which the colonial enterprise sought to "rape" or "tame". Thus the "case history" of psychology as a discipline shows that what is considered "unconscious", "dark", ("alien") and "down below" - is Women/Body/South. Principles of deciding what constitutes normal/abnormal, health and sickness, are heroic principles reinforced by Judaeo Christian monotheism. Analyses of the rise of scientific rationality show a strong harmony between the heroic approach to knowledge and the psychology of colonialism. In both instances the unconscious/South had to be tamed.

Heroic Science

The impact of the Cartesian split is discernible, beginning in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries. Along with a relegation of the body, there was an extreme fascination with the head and brain - not only in medicine but also in cultural areas such as art and literature. The period witnessed the first wax works of the head by Tussaud, Bell's beautiful drawings of the same and Goethe's theory of the skull. Locke concluded that the 'inner man is nothing but the brain' and there was an enormous amount of experiments of the effect of electricity on the brains of various animals.

Along with the physical concreteness of the head there was a resonant fascination with Iron and Steel - not just as elements of industrial construction but in medicine as well. The softness of the contrasting *body* had to be strengthened. The French scientist/doctor Pierre Cabanis (1757-1808), who almost single-handedly introduced the ideas of Locke into medicine and psychiatry, prescribed iron as the remedy for many types of brain disorders.

The head played an important role in the beginnings of physical anthropology. The science of race distinctions was based primarily on measurement and morphology of the cranium and had an immense impact on theories in psychiatry, delinquency in so-

ciology and rational justifications for slavery, colonialism and military conquest.

The Cartesian *coup de grace* was of course the Guillotine, invented by a doctor of the same name. Its steel blade spoke the "neutral" language of technology. Since it was mechanical it was objective and since it was objective it was democratic and since it was democratic it was considered humane. Finally, let us not forget *Frankenstein*, which was published in 1818. It is perhaps befitting that the author was a woman.

These are just some examples which show how an essentially metaphoric and ambiguous notion of the human psyche become "progressively" more literal, concrete and narrow; reflecting the modern attitude towards life -- and death. The original notion of psyche as (feminine) soul ended up in the formulation of I = mind = brain = consciousness leaving no room for woman and body which were relegated into oblivion or pathology. Even though the body is in fact very much a part of our sense of self and consciousness. 'Dont kick me' we say, not 'don't kick my leg'. Besides being an object, the body is also an experience. The body is both "it" and "me" and the body experience goes beyond the notion of "body image". The experience of the body is in the background of all awareness and the inner sense of one's outer reality. It is a subjective object and an objective subject as for example, when one goes to a doctor and views "it" on a screen.

Female Body/Masculine Consciousness

The hero can be seen in other areas of science. According to Hillman, Western civilization's view of the inferiority of women is a 'series of footnotes to the Biblical version of Adam and Eve'. It is relevant to note that the entire structure on which the metaphor of Adam and Eve is based is physical, that is, it reflects the male body and its images in anatomy - but its impact has been more widespread. According to Genesis I, Adam was fashioned in God's image and Eve made from him. The existence, essence and material substances of Eve depends on Adam. Her divinity is second hand, his consciousness superior since Eve was extracted from his rib during sleep, that is, when he was unconscious.

The medical historian Ludwig Edelstein has observed that the theory of the human body is always part of philosophy. It is not merely physiological investigation but always part of a particular philosophy and *Weltanschauung*. Cited facts are always embedded in a particular philosophy. Across the history of medical sciences,

in research ranging from anatomy, physiology, embryogeny and chemical embryology, one can see how the idea of Eve as dark, unconscious and the 'abysmal side of bodily man' remains a recurrent motif. As late as the 18th century, eminent medical scientists saw complete forms of creatures in sperm, horses or humans. William Harvey, who discovered the circulation of the blood, concluded that semen was not necessary for conception. Female ovum was discovered in 1827, but its discoverer Von Baer did not envision it necessary for conception. This was not discovered until well over 70 years later. As Hillman says:

We encounter a long and incredible history of theoretical misadventures and observational errors in male science regarding physiology and reproduction. These fantastic theories and observations are not the usual necessary mistakes on the road to scientific progress, they are recurrent depredations of the feminine, phrased in the unimpeachable language of science...

These examples illustrate the impossibility of absolute objective knowledge even in "pure" science leave alone the social sciences. As Einstein said, it is the theory which determines what we observe. Thus, theorizing is always prone to preconception and there is a vicious circle in which preconceptions become a part of what is being observed and in turn are reinforced by the result of the observations. This is why one has chosen the long historical view. Remaining in the present would be to remain trapped in modern conceptions without gaining any real perspective on these issues.

Finally, the history of the study of human sexuality reflects these same motifs of a dominant masculine consciousness imposed on women. Initially there were Freud's categories of "immature" versus "mature" orgasm for women which until the 1960s lead to innumerable women being diagnosed as "frigid". Today, the Masters and Johnson studies suggest that women's capacity for orgasm may be "superior" to males because of the possibility of "multiple" orgasms. Overtly "superior" in its quantitative aspect, the *possibility* of multiple orgasm continues to convey an impression of functioning *below* a desirable threshold. Like modern life and knowledge, it is institutionalized *frustration*. There is always something more ...

The entire construction of female sexuality is of a disembodied penis (en)vying with another as to who can have more orgasms.

One can also question the tragedy or comedy inherent in such science as it investigates an activity which most humans indulge in intimate privacy without being connected to electrodes while being viewed by others behind one-way mirrors. Yet, these studies form the foundations in medical curricula across the world and generalizations made about human sexuality.

They thus provide our final symbol/example of the place of body, knowledge and gender and the system of knowledge which seeks to impose itself not only on humanity but on its own, that is Western women. As Hillman has said,

theories of the female body are preponderantly based on the observations and fantasies of men. They are statements of masculine consciousness confronted with its sexual opposite.

In the Masters and Johnson studies, one of the investigators was a woman. It illustrates the idea that the issue is not of being literally a man or woman, but of a type of consciousness at work in modern knowledge. This is overwhelmingly heroic, masculine, violent and misogynist. In the Masters and Johnson studies, the freedom of women is modeled on male priorities of power and quantity. By making a technology of orgasm, along with steady refining of other technologies of abortion and contraception, women can more closely approximate male sexual patterns of a "free" and "healthily" male sexuality. While Freud is "debunked", penis envy lives on.

It would be very unfortunate if these issues in epistemology are regarded as significant only for non-Western cultures. The implications are equally severe for Western women themselves. They are perhaps doubly tragic for Third World men and women whose psychological structures of consciousness are still closer to the natural diversity of the myths. "Development" and its linear ideal of a Darwinian "progress" needs to be reconsidered in the light of what are possibly more realistic (and balanced) notions of behaviour, knowledge, life and existence. Epistemology means a logos of knowledge. This cannot be separated from the logos of the human psyche, psychology, which produces epistemology.

Finally, while I am presently locating myself in the postmodern perspective, this not to say that that I whole heartedly endorse it. There are many questions which can and have been raised about postmodernism deserving serious considerations. But these can be tackled only after there is a thorough grasp of what constitutes the modern perspective. To the extent that postmodernism

represents a crucial shift in knowledge paradigms it is a significant and vital development. One welcomes it therefore as a much needed, contrasting analytic framework which may help to disengage us intellectually from the modernist approach. My focus is on this present process of unshackling or loosening the bonds of modernity through the postmodern which, as I have said, has its own shackles.

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