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## Quest for the Ideal: Devi versus Reality

By Jayita Sengupta<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This short essay is a reflective piece attempting to understand the cultural nuances of Indian society, which shapes the consciousness of Indian men and women. While Indian society worships the 'Devi,' it does not treat women with the respect they deserve. Also, women sometimes do not deserve that admiration. There is always a conflict between the ideal and the real, and the quest for love and beauty remains an eternal one.

*Keywords:* Real, Ideal, Semiotics, Devi, Ardhanariswar

Unlike the Judaic cultures which are monotheistic and monological, the Hindu cultural ethos is dialogical and is based on the concept of *ardhanariswar*.<sup>2</sup> The cultural archetype manifests itself in various figurines in temples, ancient architecture and in Hindu texts. It is a part of the Hindu cultural imagination. However, it only exists in our supra-consciousness and not many attain that consciousness. Among the masses, the middle class, or the upper-class the story basically is similar, where the conflict between the sexes often results in violence. Yet it is untrue to think that it is only the women, and not men, who are oppressed. We may worship our cultural archetype, yet how many women can rise to become a *Devi*<sup>3</sup> and how many men can be the ideal *purusha*<sup>4</sup>? Not many can become a Sarada Devi<sup>5</sup> or Anandamoyi Ma,<sup>6</sup> or Amma<sup>7</sup> in South India of our own times. They are mother figures, and a major part of Indian womanhood is the attribute of giving selflessly. I recall the famous thumri singer Vidya Rao mentioning once years ago at a cultural festival at Indraprastha College, in Delhi, what her Guru had once said. To sing a thumri,<sup>8</sup> he said, one has to fall in love at least a hundred times. The singer had laughed and told us humourously that it is difficult to find one true man to be really in love with, forget about a hundred! When I retold this story to a rising thumri singer of our own times, one who is a painter and sculptor too, he had said smiling: 'where is that ideal woman who could call for that adoration and love these days?'. Either way, there seems to be something missing in this world: that passion, that intensity, that ability to burn with that hard gemlike flame. Something that T.S. Eliot refers to "In a Game of Chess;" something that Tagore reminiscences in his response to Kalidasa's *Meghdoot* in the poem by the same name. For an artist or a poet, the quest for beauty and love is an eternal one. And this world of ours only whets our appetite for that eternal quest.

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<sup>1</sup> Jayita Sengupta is an academic from India, who loves writing short stories and painting.

<sup>2</sup> *Ardhanariswar* in Hindu mythology consists of *Shiva* (masculine) and *Shakti* (feminine) principles, inseparable from one another. "Ardha" means half, "Nari" means woman and "Ishwar" means a God who is androgynous.

<sup>3</sup> *Devi* means Goddess.

<sup>4</sup> *Purusha* means Male.

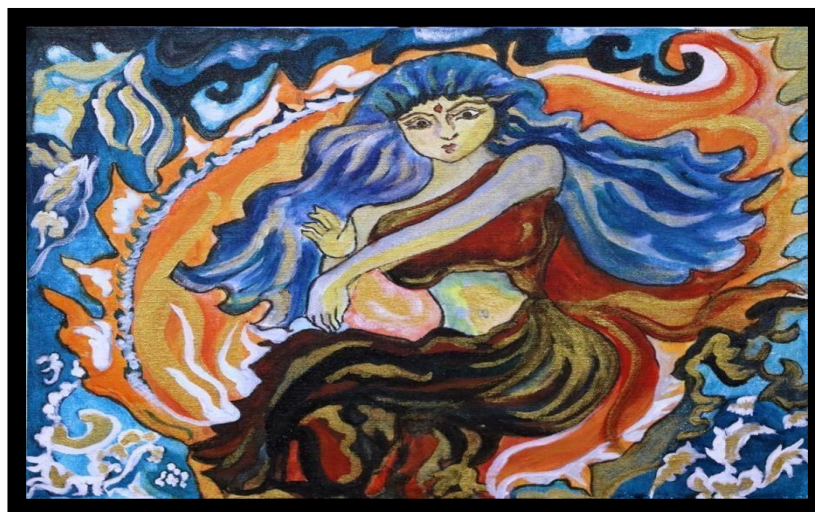
<sup>5</sup> Sarada Devi was the wife of the spiritual Guru and mystic Shri Ramakrishna.

<sup>6</sup> Anandamoyi Ma was an Indian saint and yoga Guru (1896-1982).

<sup>7</sup> Amma is Mata Amritanandamayi Devi in South India, known for her humanitarian work and as a spiritual leader.

<sup>8</sup> Thumri is North India's most popular light-classical song form, developed during the 19th century at the court of Lucknow's ruler Wajid Ali Shah.

Figure 1



Somehow what comes to mind when thinking of the woman as “Devi” (Fig. 1), and how the world treats her, is Provat Kumar Mukhopadhyay’s short story, “Devi,” and Satyajit Ray’s film based on the story. In the story and the film, an ordinary young housewife is made into a Devi-like figure by her father-in-law and the village people because by chance she once cured a young child whom her doctor father-in-law had failed to cure. But this magic does not last for long, and when the child in her family whom she loved dearly dies, the family and the village people do not forgive her. Yet when she is fleeing her village with her husband, it strikes her: “What if I am really a Devi?” The archetypal image of power has its own lures. Ray’s film beautifully captures this dilemma in the woman, who decides to return to her village once again. The desire to merge with archetypal motherhood entices both those who want to tune in with that cultural imagination and those who believe in it. This is wonderfully portrayed in Rabindranath Tagore’s poem, where the widowed mother believes in what the priest suggests for curing her ailing son. She places him in the flowing waters of the Ganges, with the belief that the mother river will cure her son and return him back to her. While there is such creative imagination that time and again questions the relevance of the archetypal image of the mother goddess, *Devi puja*<sup>9</sup> continues unabated. Domestic violence, violence in workplaces, and marital rape continues not only in the lower classes, but in the educated middle class and upper class too. Even in this era of feminism, a woman cannot speak openly because she is constantly subjected to the male gaze.

When I started working on my visual story collection, *Shivelight and other Stories* (2020), I stated in my preface: “My intention here has been to capture the underlying resistance to the patriarchal states through the semiotic play of the archetypal image of the *ardhanarishwar* (Shiva-Parvati) in the eternal dance of creation and destruction of Time.” I also reflected that “the stories are an experiential part of a spiritual quest, through life’s razor.” My paintings are semiotic renditions of feminine desire and strength, including Vajrayogini

<sup>9</sup> Devi Puja could be Devi Kalika or Durga. In this context, Devi Ganga.

(Fig. 2), the secular version of Durga, and Saraswati, the different archetypes we seek within ourselves.

**Figure 2**



And there are certain moments where the feminine imaginary reaches out to embrace the masculine within the self. Moyna in the story “Nayika” has a vision of the dancing figure, as she was a dancer herself once, but her life does not allow her to follow that vision. In separation from her family, in moments of self-confrontation, she has visitations of a manly figure who had come to her earlier in her family space. The vision in clear tones completely grips her again in her isolation in the Himalayan town:

The twinkling lights in the hills were going out one by one as the night stretched on. The sound of water from the jhoras was more distinct with darkness deepening gradually. It was time that Moyna went indoors. She was not really hungry. The snacks that she had eaten with Anira, her colleague at M.G. Marg were pretty heavy. Just a glass of warm milk with some brandy would work fine, she thought. As she sank into her pillow later in the night and closed her eyes, she could sense strangeness. There was a rhythm rising from the deep. It was at low key but unmistakable. It was like the beats of the mridang in slow rhythm ...

*Dha dha dhen ta  
Kat taka dhen ta  
Tete kata gadi ghene  
Dha ...*

There was someone dancing. A flute was playing somewhere. The beats gathered momentum, with the variations of the theka. A strange yet mild sandalwood perfume was slowly enveloping the room. She tried to see through the hazy light and shade. A

tall black figure with slender waist and hair up to his shoulders was gracefully dancing to:

*Dha din ta*

*Dhetta kere dha*

*Takka thungga, takiteta ka*

*Tetekata gadhighene*

His steps were in perfect rhythm with the beats and every part of his body danced with his movement. Which place was this? Where was she? A golden shaft of light was circling the dancer through the bluish smoky screen that the room was transformed into. Moyna could feel the rhythm in her veins. She could feel herself tuned to the beats. (Sengupta, 2020, p. 59)

For me, the sense of liberation has always been a quest within. The voyeuristic male gaze or the oppressive female gaze can be resisted, and it is indeed necessary to progress beyond resistance to self-realization. The eyes that gag the woman (Fig. 4) and the loneliness that bears her away like a leaf in a storm-tossed sea (Fig. 3) could be challenged by evoking the feminine imaginary.

**Figure 3**



Figure 4



The trajectory is from the state of being gagged to a celebration of the self, caring for no eyes that gaze and turning the gaze within. So, the flight is from that which oppresses to the celebration of self-embracing joy (Fig. 5).

Figure 5



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