

THINKING THE “MATERNAL”: A PSYCHO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVE ON MOTHERHOOD AMONG HINDU MIGRANTS ROMINA
ROSSI SETTLED IN ROME

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims at investigating the reception of the values of the “Maternal” among members of a Hindu community based in Rome, combining psycho-anthropological and ludosophical perspectives and methodologies.

Starting from the works of the Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, I put forth the hypothesis that an ambivalent idea of motherhood looms up not only in the “Inner World” of Indian male patients, but also in copious myths belonging to the traditional religious corpus: In fact if, on one hand, the mother is considered as the most cherished source of nourishment and love, on the other she is depicted as a threatening seductress that imposes on her defenceless baby to gain that fondness and consideration she has never enjoyed in the husband’s family.

Is this ambivalence towards the “maternal” rooted in the Indian psyche and culture or has it experienced substantial alterations due to phenomena related to migration and integration?

Adopting the philosophical game as a fieldwork methodology, I aim to gather data focusing on the multifarious ideas concerning motherhood among Hindu people based in Rome and to investigate if and how these visions have been influenced by the local culture.

- AN INTRODUCTION

I leave my shoes on the shelf, right outside the inner door of the “Om Hindu Mandir”. A sudden smell of incense welcomes me, as soon as I surpass the threshold: then, a horde of colours displays itself in the form of flowers, posters, *murtis* and garlands. Kṛṣṇa and Radhā, at the centre of the altar, quietly wait for the forthcoming *pūjā*.

Nobody seems to be there, so I spend some time observing the pictures that surround the walls of the room: while I am taking some pictures of the temple, a man comes into view from a small door next to the altar: I introduce myself and immediately learn that he is the temple keeper. We will call him Choton. He informs me that he comes from Bengala, and so does the majority of the people who visit the Mandir; he works only on Sundays as a vendor and has his own stand: the rest of the week he is busy doing what he really wants to do: praying.

“You Italians work for about eight hours per day, then stay with the family for other eight hours and, afterwards, you sleep for the remaining eight. Where is the time for God?”, he asks me. Then, he goes on explaining that only with devotion, and through daily worship, human beings can attain the favour of the Gods and, then, a fruitful life.

I decide to take advantage of Choton’s propensity for the storytelling and invite him to elucidate the worshipper’s relationship with such a complex figure as Durga: since when I began studying Hindu mythology I’ve always been struck by her fearsome demeanour, her boundless power, her possibility of being a goddess, and so a woman, without being at the same time subject to the strict moral code that shapes a good wife’s behaviour. More accurately, what I ask Choton is: “Why should this goddess, who kills and has no mercy, who displays her fury almost beyond any limits, be perceived as a caring

mother?”. When I speak, I have in mind the powerful verses of the *Devīmāhātmyam*¹, but also hundreds of pages of academic studies around the “hidden” potential of such an icon: in her astonishingly lie all the antithesis, but is it conceivable to imagine Devī as a problematic symbol, behind whose pacific synthesis a patriarchal anxiety towards the feminine conceals itself?

- HINDU TEMPLES IN ROME

Since my first time, in May, I have been visiting the “Om Hindu Mandir” regularly, at least once a week. It consists of an average sized room located in the heart of Torpignattara, one of the most multi-ethnic neighbourhoods of the Italian capital city, as much as to deserve the nickname of “Banglatown”.

I live in the same area, and so I frequently took part in ceremonies, rituals and parades, for instance on the occasion of the Ratha Yatra, occurring on the 25th of June and on the 3rd of July. During the last procession I was introduced to another temple, which, as many worshippers have claimed, has been the first Hindu Mandir in Rome: it is called “Hindu Udjapan Parishad – Radha Krishna Mandir”, it is only 0,2 miles away from the “Om Hindu Mandir” and, every Sunday evening, it hosts public pujas. The community that gathers in both the temples is mainly composed of Bangladeshi people, whose migration to Italy was generally driven by the quest of a “better life”, an idea which includes improved earning opportunities and freedom to profess Hinduism: indeed, as Choton stated during our first meeting, in Bangladesh Hindu devotees belong to a minority (9.5%

¹ *Devī Mahātmyā - Glory of the Divine Mother* (1953), English translation by Swami Jagadiswarananda, Mysalpore (with Sanskrit text), Chennai, Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing Press.

according to the 2011 Census of Bangladesh)² and are persecuted and intimidated by extremist fringes of Muslim population³.

Differently from the Hindu temples located in Torpignattara, the “Kalimandir” was founded by an Italian Baba who has lived in India for twenty years before deciding to return to Rome and establish his own worship place: having taken the name of Yogi Krishna Nath, he upgraded an inherited farmstead in the western suburbs of the city, an area called Casal Lumbroso, and built small temples mainly dedicated to Śiva and Kālī. Many Hindu devotees from all over the world come and visit the “Kalimandir”, which unquestionably acts as a reference point for the Indian diasporic community established in Rome.

- IN SEARCH OF THE HIDDEN MOTHER

According to the most famous Indian Psychoanalyst, Sudhir Kakar, the Indian mother is a far from being an unproblematic figure in their children’s psyche⁴: if, on the one side, she is the first source of nourishment and love, on the other side she is perceived as a treacherous seductress, whose physical proximity provokes an overwhelming sense of guilt in the defenceless baby. He tellingly calls her the “Engulfing Mother”⁵. As a proof, Kakar lists a number of myths and folktales who share the characteristic of being

² Bangladesh Populations and Housing Census 2011 – IPUMS, available online at https://international.ipums.org/international-action/variables/BD2011A_0405#codes_section

³ <http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/aug/09bang.htm> and <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2013/03/bangladesh-wave-violent-attacks-against-hindu-minority/#.UTeKDSrYyD8.twitter>

⁴Kakar, Sudhir (1982), *The Inner World. A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press.

⁵Kakar, Sudhir (2016), “The Engulfing Mother in Indian Mythology: Masculinity and Conflicting Desires”, in *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change*, 1(1) 60–64, SAGE Publications, India.

populated by ambivalent mothers whose devouring love, one way or another, ends up harming their creature, especially if male: we might think of the *apsarā* Urvaśī who metaphorically emasculates Arjuna because of his refusal to have a sexual intercourse with her, or of Gaṇeś, beheaded by his father who mistakes him for a rival while guarding the naked body of her mother, or even of the ogress Pūtanā, ready to poison to death the infant Kṛṣṇa. And it is precisely around this narration that I would like to focus, in order to elucidate the contradictory status of the maternal revealed by some Hindu myths: the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.6)⁶ tells the story of the demon Pūtanā, sent by the malevolent Kāṁsa in order to devour Kṛṣṇa, who, according to a prophecy, would have killed him. Having transformed into a beautiful woman, she entered the abode of the god: she then took the infant on her lap, behaving like an affectionate mother. Yaśodā was observing her silently, overpowered by Pūtanā's beauty and affable attitude towards her son. She could not suspect that the demon's breast had been smeared with a powerful poison, intended to immediately kill the infant. Reading into her heart, though, Kṛṣṇa, squeezed her breast very hard with both hands, and sucked out not only the poisonous milk, but also Pūtanā's life itself. When Yaśodā understood what had just happened, she rushed to give her healthy nipples to his son, and put him to sleep.

The story goes on illustrating how the ogress, touched by the grace of Kṛṣṇa and by virtue of the great pleasure offered to the infant by her maternal body, obtained the position of a mother in the transcendental world and so attained liberation.

Although this myth was meant to offer evidence of the limitless power and mercy of the Supreme Godhead, it might prove worthwhile to compare it with the theories articulated by the Object Relation School of Psychoanalysis, and particularly with Melanie Klein's

⁶ *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (1950-1955), translated by a board of scholars, VOLL. I-V, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass.

hypothesis of the good and bad breast⁷. According to her, the infant has pre-existent innate and unconscious *imagos*, for example that of the breast, which are characterized by a sharp ambivalence: when the fantasized breast meets the real one, a split of the *imago* occurs. If the real breast gratifies the child's impulses, it is perceived as good, while if it is absent or frustrating, the reinforced image is that of the bad breast. During the *schizo-paranoid position*, the infant is in the grip of annihilation, pleasure deferral and abandonment anguishes and so he fantasizes to attack the evil nipple by placing his own excrements in the maternal body. But, in so doing, he turns out to fear retaliatory attacks. Consequently, he *projects* his aggressiveness on that breast. At the same time, the baby also introduces the negative and persecuting parts of himself in the maternal body to come into its possession. But since, now, parts of the baby's self are contained into the maternal body, it ceases to be a separate object and then it is perceived as the infant's negative Self (*projective identification*). During this stage, the child intensely hates this container of persecuting and evil aspects of himself, but at the same time he is dependent on the breast for his survival: the oppressive and malignant substances are therefore re-*introjected*, but now with vindictive aims. If the real breast confirms these internal feelings, the child will keep on splitting partial objects into polarities and will evoke frightening internal objects. The myth of Pūtanā could be read as a strikingly apt depiction of the splitting of the partial object (the maternal breast) into a good breast (Yaśodā) and a bad breast (Pūtanā): it might suggest that also in the Indian psyche it is possible to trace an ambivalent idea of motherhood, which cracks into polarities. It might well hint at the fact that for every good mother there is also a bad one, hidden somewhere in the unconscious.

⁷ Klein, Melanie (1978), *Scritti 1921 – 1958*, Torino, Boringhieri (Italian translation of the original: *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis 1921 – 1945*, 1948, London, The Hogarth Press; *Developments in Psycho – Analysis*, 1952, London, Hogarth Press).

Yet, as reported by Kakar, there is nothing as inconceivable for an Indian son as to complain about his own mother: he describes as “infinitesimally small” the percentage of men admitting to feel dread or aversion for her⁸. The psychological explanation might lie in the creation of what the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut calls the “Idealized parental imago”, a narcissistic configuration that arises from the child’s attribution of the qualities of omnipotence and faultlessness, symbols of a lost narcissistic perfection, to an idealized part of the Self, which allows for a total merger with an all-powerful object. Parents, then, and peculiarly the mother, becomes an extension of the Self and cannot be perceived as external and separate. As a consequence, an attack to the “idealized parental imago” is tantamount to an unbearable attack to the Self.

When I came to know about the attitude of Kakar’s Indian male patients, I was struck: my generation and the previous one have been conspicuously marked by a strong conflict against the parental figures, and none of the people I know would describe their mothers as flawless. Moreover, I started to question maternal love as an instinct, almost a biological inheritance that women are supposed to have, or better, must have, unless they want to be labelled as “de-naturalised”, wretched, missed mothers. I then became curious to know if residing in a Western country could have affected Hindu people’s perception of the “maternal”: in the next section I will comment on two interviews which may contribute to the ongoing discussion on the topic.

⁸ Kakar, Sudhir (2007), *The Indians. Portrait of a people*, Delhi, Penguin/Viking.

- TWO CASE STUDIES

In designing a suitable psycho-anthropologically oriented interview framework, I have followed the so-called FANI METHOD (“Free Association Narrative Interview method”)⁹, according to which the informant, making use of free association between concepts, nouns, images, anecdotes and so on, could partly overcome the rational defences and the anxiety provoked by traumas and intersubjective social experiences. In order to elicit a narration I borrowed from a recent branch of the “Practical Philosophy”, the “Ludosophy”¹⁰, two games based on terms association and image-title association: in the first case the interviewed people have been asked to select ten terms (adjectives and substantives) among a list of thirty-one, on the basis of their effectiveness in expressing the informants’ own idea of “motherhood” (terms could also be added by the participants); afterwards, they have been invited to link the terms in couples and to attribute to the linkage a value of similarity (+) or opposition (-), and finally they have been asked to comment on their choices. The second game (submitted to the last two informants only) consisted in the selection of five pictures out of thirty-four, in consonance with the informants’ concept of “maternal”, “mother”, “motherhood”.

⁹ Hollway, Wendy and Jefferson, Tony (2009). “Researching defended subjects with the free association narrative interviewing method”, In: Cook, Harold J.; Bhattacharya, Sanjoy and Hardy, Anne eds. *History of the social determinants of health: Global histories, contemporary debates*. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, pp. 296–315.

¹⁰ Miceli, Arcangela (2014), *Ludosofia. Il counseling e i giochi filosofici*, Torino, Ananke.

TANUJĀ¹¹

I meet Tanujā at her husband's flower shop, near the touristic area of Trastevere. She is 23-years-old Bengali woman with a B.A. in Indian Philosophy. She was born in Barisal and at the beginning she lived in a joint family, until when it became too numerous and it had to split. After completion of her studies, she moved to Rome to follow her husband, who was already working and living here. She tells me that she likes this city, and that, from time to time, she and her husband visit the Hindu temple in Torpignattara, where I met them for the first time, and spend time with some families belonging to the same religious group.

As an icebreaker, I propose to play the game of the terms association. I give her a paper with the following thirty-one words: caring, suffocating, heavenly, sensual, sun, gentle, beautiful, austere, forgiving, goddess, nourishment, breast, milk, intrusiveness, home, womb, earth, compromise, protection, destructive, powerful, attentive, absent-minded, busy, tidiness, luminosity, moon, sky, ugly, demons, vulnerable. Her choice is: gentle – attentive (+); forgiving – powerful (+); caring – goddess (+); earth – compromise (+); protection – destructive (-).

For the sake of brevity, I will only remark upon the second (+) and the fifth couples (-): Tanujā maintains that parents have power on their kids, and because of their authority they can concede forgiveness. Parents always absolve their children, even when they become adults. Besides, parents always protect their children, but they can also destroy them if they fail to be caring and attentive. It is their fault if children do not grow up well. For instance, if they are too busy and do not look after them, their children could start making use of drugs.

¹¹ In full respect of privacy, I changed the names of the informants.

The interview goes on in a more structured way: I ask her what it means to be a daughter, and she replies that it is a fortune, because in this way one can experience parental love. Notwithstanding having been brought up by her mother, she feels more like a friend than a daughter, and now that she is adult she takes care of her, even if her mother does not live with her: she phones her constantly, three or four times a day.

I then ask what does it mean in her opinion being a mother; at this point she states that becoming mothers is extremely important for every woman, because it comes a moment in life when every woman desires to bear a child: “Even if I am not yet one of them, and so I cannot know what it means, according to what I have heard from other women, becoming mothers means getting to... I don’t know, I can’t explain the feeling, I don’t find the right word”.

She interrupts.

Involuntarily acting a bit insensitively, I solicit an answer, and suggest thinking of an image, a memory, and everything she associates with the feeling of becoming mother. She resumes the sentence, her tone lowers, she hesitates: “it means... it means... it means... it is the expression of being a woman... but I forgot the question, sorry”. I reformulate the question, she nods and nervously laughs. I understand that this query is troublesome and say that she can choose not to answer, if she wishes. She replies: “Well, then, I prefer to avoid it”.

The next question is “Can a mother be bad?”. Her answer is: “A mother can never be bad! In no case. Even when a mother scolds her children, she does it for their good”. I go on inquiring if she has ever had bad feelings against her mother, or if she has ever perceived her as too intrusive or oppressive: again, she decisively says no. She tells me that she has always been granted freedom in her youth, so she has never experienced their parents as suffocating.

I proceed with my interview and ask if, in her opinion, becoming mothers is a duty for all women. She answers: "Definitely it is, but I cannot explain why. On a social level, also, it is a duty. I do not know what other people say, but for me it's a duty, it's something I should do". When I ask for whom is maternity a necessity, she explains that both society and family require women to become mothers, but that this is not inevitably a duty, that she does not think of it as an obligation, but that it works like this: at a certain point in time, women are willing to bear children. I inquire if she has in mind a sort of "maternal instinct", and she firmly says yes. Then, I ask if women who cannot be mothers for many different reasons are disrespectful of social expectations: she replies that, if renouncing to maternity is a choice, a woman can freely do it, but, since families are made of parents and children who in turn will be parents once grown older, in doing so she surely break some kind of social rules. Without children, she states, we are not in presence of a complete family.

The last question is a calculated risk: I ask her what kind of mother she would like to become. Slightly deflecting the real sense of it, she affirms: "all the qualities that a mother should have, I think I own them". This proud claim pushes me to elicit some more details, but she wearily points to the terms that she had previously selected during our first game. I remind her that she can refuse to answer, and again, with an enigmatic smile, she decides to stop.

MĀNDĪP

Māndīp is a Punjabi thirty-one years-old man who works for an agency that processes administrative procedures on behalf of the Indian Embassy in Rome. Initially he had a very good job in the sales marketing in Patiala, but he decided to leave India and to move to Europe, because nobody in his family had ever gone abroad. His first migration choice

was Latvia, where he started to attend a Master's program in Public Relationships. Before completing it, he relocated to Copenhagen, where he realized he could not support himself. Afterwards, he decided to move to Hamburg, but he was not able to find a good job and, lately he accepted an Indian friend's proposal to reach him in Rome and work in his agency as an employee, a job he has been doing for three years and a half.

During our second meeting, in the multicultural neighbourhood of Pigneto, I ask him if he is part of a local Hindu community; surprisingly, he replies that he is not very religious and that he does not want to join any community, being surrounded as he is by friends of the most disparate origins. What I perceive is that he considers belonging more as a limit than as an opportunity.

I exhibit the paper with the list of terms and the thirty-four pictures and ask him to play with the modalities I explained before.

At the beginning, he seems sceptical about the possibility of efficaciously describing what a mother is, but after a further clarification on the general purpose of the game, he accepts to play and produces the following couples:

cares – gentle (+); protection – home (+).

Then, he stops and declares that a mother is also a good advisor and a financial advisor, as well as a best friend. I suggest writing the new terms on the paper, and so he does. The new couples are:

good advisor – financial advisor (+); forgiving – best friend (+); powerful – sensual (?).

When Māndīp selects the word “sensual”, I immediately call to mind a previous interview with another man who confused the words sensual and sensitive. When asked, he confirms that what he means is “delicate, affectionate, kind-hearted”, and then I exhort him to write this new adjective in substitution of “sensual”. As a result, the last couple splits, because Māndīp believes that powerful is not linkable to sensitive. We have, therefore, two single adjectives describing the “maternal”.

According to him, a mother - better than a father - can give good advice about how to invest money, because while men are eager to earn more and more but waste it, women are wiser and know how to manage it in a proper way. A mother is powerful because she is the most important figure in the house: she is a best friend because she is always ready to listen to their children and to advise them in the best possible way.

The game of the pictures is difficult to describe in all its potential, because of the lack of the graphic support; in any case, Māndīp selects pictures C - B - A - M - O and gives them the following titles:

C: The joint family;

B: Disturbing family;

A: Relationship between mother-in-law- and daughter-in-law;

M: Financial values;

O: Happy family.

I would like to analyse picture B: the first image portrays a trio composed of a teenager girl in focus at the centre, while a woman is shouting and pointing at her on the left side and a man is protesting with both hands raised over his head on the right side. Both the characters are out of focus, while the girl has both hands on her ears and looks downwards. Describing it, Māndīp states that situation is common nowadays: parents with two different personalities have clashes, but it would be wiser to argue in the bedroom and not in front of their daughter or son. Indeed, this behaviour has negative repercussions on them, because they will reproduce a dangerous educative and sentimental example. According to him, in the past this did not happen so often, because people were more patient and more willing to listen to each other. The fault is, in his opinion, of the technology: “everyone wants to be updated, but people forget to remain updated with their partners”, he peremptorily states.

It is worth noting that the people portrayed in picture B are of Caucasian appearance.

This idealised vision of family, whose altar is consecrated to the goddess-mother, clearly emerges also from the interview with Māndīp: when asked about the meaning of being a son, he answers that in his culture it means being responsible for his parents and being answerable to them, willing or not. It means pursuing the family, following the rules, continuing the generation. He then narrates of the strong bond with his mother: even when he was more than twenty, he felt the urge to see her many times during the day, because her vision made him feel extremely well. Notwithstanding being busy, he always found time to visit her in the daytime. He nostalgically concludes the answer saying: “you can’t expect a home without a mother. I really miss her”.

I then inquire on the possibility of the existence of a “bad mother”. He replies that he does not think that a mother could be bad: “Maybe some circumstances put her on the situation where she became bad, for example maybe she has an argument with the father, maybe she has problems with her family or with the in-law’s family, maybe she has problems with money or with the job... In that case she could be bad, but I don’t think this is the word for her”. He goes on blaming the Indian male-dominated society because of its obsession for the baby boys: in conformity with this sex preference, many women are forced to undergo abortions and, in some cases, to abandon their daughters. So, in Māndīp’s opinion, these are the only circumstances in which a mother could be considered “bad”. The fact of being part of a patriarchal society, though, partly justifies her reprehensible deeds.

Necessarily ignoring the enormous ethical implications of the discourse, I go on asking if he has ever had bad feelings towards one of his parents. Again, his answer is no: if he gets angry with his mother, is because she is “so caring”. Taking advantage of this statement, which anticipates the following question, I immediately ask if he perceived her as too intrusive, obsessive, almost “vampiring”. He is quite surprised of the choice of this

last word and assures me that he has never seen her like this: she is neither “too” caring nor too obsessive, she only takes care of him. Successively, I ask Māndīp if it is a duty for all women to become mothers: she replies that he does not consider it as a duty, and that there are many examples of women adopting children instead of bearing children, especially in the urban areas. In the rural zones the situation is different, people still follow the traditional regulations and there becoming mothers it is perceived as a duty.

In fine, I ask him if what kind of father he would like to be: “I would like to be a good father, to protect them, to give them a good education, independence and freedom: they were not born to... I would like to give them everything, whatever it means”.

CONCLUSIONS

My research is a work in progress: as such, it cannot offer definitive data, nor draw exhaustive conclusions. Nevertheless, it might represent an attempt to interpret the multifarious ideas of the maternal that many Hindu people share. According to the data in my possession, in the psyche of Indian sons and daughters stands out a flawless, perfect, idealized mother: when she fails, she does so not because of her incapability, not because of a malevolent attitude. She blunders because men force her to do so.

If the Kohutian *idealized parental imago* is at stake here, we might hypothesize that Indian sons and daughters are unconsciously struggling to conceal the possibility of imagining an imperfect mother, a “bad breast” like that of the demon Pūtanā.

I wonder if this image, instead of glorifying women, could weaken them instead: what if one of them rebels to the tradition and does not become a mother? Is she as much respectable as a child-bearer? Is she safe when she walks alone in the street at night? Does she equally deserve the esteem of the family and of the husband, if she wishes any?

I call to mind the ferocious icon of Durgā/Kālī left in the introduction: I am amazed by her magnificence, by her significance. Maybe she is the key to understanding patriarchal anxiety towards a mysterious and powerful feminine, which, encompassing all definitions, simultaneously shows her fierce freedom and her profound affection for humanity.

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