



# A Terrible Beauty is Born

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## ***A Terrible Beauty is Born***

### **Abstract:**

Psychoanalysis from the time of Freud has borrowed generously from mythology. This paper looks at how mythology has been thought of psychoanalytically. It looks specifically at the cult of a particular mother goddess, Durga in Bengal. This figure—especially in popular or folk evocations—refuses any univocal meaning. In fact, this powerful image seems to provide a psychic space where it is represented variously as murderous, tender, playful, enigmatic, and forbearing. The mythic mother goddess is not so much a repository of fixed meaning/s, but rather an elastic psychic space that is a bearer of shifting projections.

The paper plots different psychic positions that become points of locution.

### **Keywords:**

Myth, goddess, psychoanalysis, female imaginary

## **Introduction: Mythology and Psychoanalysis**

*mythology—muthos (word, story) + logia (study)*

Sigmund Freud's use of mythology from the time he wrote about Oedipus at the turn of the twentieth century has played a significant role in psychoanalysis ever since. Struck by the play, Freud conjec-

tured it as a universal story. Thinking of its universal appeal, he was driven to move from the individual to the collective in his writings. The mythical came to be that which transcends the personal and embodies the universal; it is where the ontogenetic crosses over to the phylogenetic realm.

In classical psychoanalysis, myths have mostly been read allegorically, as imaginative elaborations of desires and fears that lie buried in the repressed chambers of our mind. In the use of myth as allegory, there is a Romantic belief in primordial impulses as repositories of truth and in the incantatory power of mythical figures and times invoked. Carl Jung and Freud share this awe, which brings us into the proximity of these unconscious impulses. Both believed that myths arise from the unconscious, and that interpreting them gives clues to our unconscious minds. Myths are dreamed by an individual creator but passed on from one generation to the next. For Jung, this leads to the idea of myths being evidence of a “collective unconscious” (Jung 1964; Segal 1999). Jung finds a resemblance between the workings of the unconscious that do the dream work and the archaic psyche that produced the myths. For Freud, myths, like dreams, are linked to the pleasure principle as well as to repressed desire; while for Jung, myths also work to integrate parts of the unconscious that have not found expression and make for a more creatively fulfilled psyche. Myths across time and space have recurrent patterns and figures that Jung (1990 [1959]: 5) calls “archetypes.” These are the contents of the collective unconscious — that which is common to all “primordial types.” This idea of an archetype is founded upon an assumption of an a priori form that precedes existence.

Freud also uses the term “myth” to speak of instincts. In a 1933 letter to Albert Einstein, “Why War,” he writes, “the theory of instincts is so to say our mythology. Instincts are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness” (1933: 95). Extending the previous use of the term mythology, Freud is boldly suggesting that the human psyche has its own mythology — let us call it psychoanalytic mythology.

In *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13), Freud does not mine existent myths for psychic clues, he instead weaves a myth that is like a history of the unconscious. Read like a dream, the brothers in this dreamscape murdered their father and the subsequent guilt moved them to seek punishment, which led to incest becoming taboo. This is not a historical account, but it is the psychoanalytic equivalent to it. The myth’s landscape and language give it the power of an uncanny emotional experience. Unlike Sophocles, who writes of one cursed man, Freud’s myth is no longer an individual story; it is about a collective conspiracy. It is not a curse

upon one man, but upon the human condition. He creates an allegory of mankind and imbues it with the power of mythology. It is *Oedipus Rex* and it is Prometheus. We are approaching the realm of psychoanalytic mythology, which borrows tropes from established myths to shape the understanding of psychic structures in any given moment. This is closer to the use of mythology as it unfolds in folk culture and is extended in Jacques Lacan's use of myth as a representation of how the matrix of relationships in particular moments get imagined.

In "The Neurotic's Individual Myth," Lacan (1979) suggests that the use of "mythic" can be traced to the matrix of relationships that existed at the moment it was imagined, and which can then be located in a neurotic person's symptoms, and then, by extension, called a myth. He then uses this frame to construct the imaginary:

If we proceed from the definition of myth as a certain objectified representation of an epos or as a chronicle expressing in an imaginary way the fundamental relationships characteristic of a certain mode of being human at a specific period, if we understand it as the social manifestation — latent or patent, virtual or actual, full or void of meaning — of this mode of being, then it is certain that we can trace its function in the actual experience of a neurotic. Experience reveals to us, in fact, all sorts of instantiations which fit this pattern and which, strictly speaking, one may call myths... (ibid.: 408)

In addition to Lacan seeing the mythic and the neurotic as imbricated in each other, influenced as much by Freud as by Claude Levi-Strauss, he was concerned not with the content of the myths per se, but in the structures of, and the mathematical relations between, contradictions and impossibilities. For instance, the Oedipus story can be broken down as the overvaluation of kinship (incest) and its rejection (parricide). It is this contradiction in the structure of relationships that Lacan located as the area for psychoanalytic investigation. Lacan compared the Oedipus myth's relational structure with that in *Totem and Taboo*. In the former, the mother is accessed through parricide, while in the other, the brothers' killing of the father leads to the taboo of the forbidden women. Taken together, the two myths express a contradictory set of relations. In the first, parricide paves the way for incest; in the second, parricide leads to a taboo of incest. Myths seem to elaborate contradictory structures, and Lacan sees these contradictions as embodying different forms of impossibility. Darian Leader suggests that while Freud looks at mythic narrative to elaborate the impossible psyche, "Lacan looks to the relation between mythic narratives" (2003: 48). It is this space

of contradiction and slippage that Lacan investigates as the space for unconscious eruptions.

As with Freud, who uses the term myth as an organizing principle around which the psyche coheres, Lacan too uses the term to bind a psychic structure. He imagines the child as being captivated by his mother's response to him. The mother's recognition and pleasure make him want to fulfill her desires, to find out what she lacks. He calls this the "phallus" that the child then seeks to restore for his mother (Feher-Gurewicz 2003: 193). This lost jouissance, symbolized by the phallus's entry and power of castration, appear in Lacan's myths of psychoanalysis; the constellations of which are re-enacted in and by every subject. The subject that emerges in Lacan is a solitary, involuted, and splintered figure haunted by loss and tragically cursed at birth. This is one version of the psychoanalytic myth of man.

I would like to suggest that this is where the shadow of Narcissus falls upon Oedipus. For if we study Freud's Narcissus (1962 [1914]), who appears long after his Oedipus, we may see that where one overvalues kinship (Oedipus), the other embodies disconnection (Narcissus), which leads Freud to claim that there are two ways of loving—anaclitic and narcissistic. One can say these two ways of loving taken together form a tragic myth of man. I am tempted to add that if Oedipus had heeded the prophesy, he would have taken the same path as Narcissus. But psychoanalysis is also shaped by discourses that have a decentred rationality, and it has offered different mythologies that are not founded on an involuted view of man.<sup>1</sup>

Justyna Wierzchowska draws attention to the mythologies' different poetics offered by Lacan and D. W. Winnicott in their imaginings of the mirror: "There is an essential difference between Lacan's theorizing the subject as constituted through a lonely experience of inadequacy in face of an exteriorized image of self-perfection and Winnicott's assertion that one's sense of selfhood is created through... another nourishing human being" (2018: 3). The Lacanian subject is inherently splintered, always looking for the phantasmatic object, a quest doomed to failure. By contrast, Winnicott's infant has enjoyed a good enough mother and carries an internal environment that enables a psychic holding. In one, the mirror holds up an illusion of the self (falsity), in the other, mirror is the mother who allows the baby the necessary illusion of omnipotence.

Wierzchowska writes, "in 'The Mirror Stage,' Lacan explicitly claims that the fact that after birth the child retains 'certain humoral

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<sup>1</sup> More recently the American Relational School, but before that a long history of the British Object Relations and the British Independent Schools all emphasise the role of the object.

residues of the maternal organism' confirms the '*specific prematurity of birth*'" (1949: 78). For Lacan, the mother-child blurring continues non-organically throughout the Imaginary phase. . . Since the mother and the child are not conceptualized as two separate beings, their relationship is hardly possible" (ibid.: 4).

So, Lacan imagines an adversarial relationship where the self must defend itself against the threat of fusion. First fused with mother, the infant feels estranged after a violent separation. By contrast, Winnicott, along with John Bowlby and many of the British Independent School, imagines a benign environment mother. Rather than see these as binaries, I see these as imaginaries — cultural and psychoanalytic. Taken together, they form the skeletal structure of psychic relationships that are constantly reimagined. Clinical work gives ample evidence of psyches organized along different axes of self and other. Mythology — especially in its folk manifestations — offers a space that gives itself up for constant reimagining. Like an analytic space that is created anew by each dyad, myths are reinvented constantly in history. Like Luigi Pirandello's (1954 [1921]) characters in search of a playwright, and Wilfred R. Bion's (1967) "thoughts in search of a thinker," I would say that unthought feelings are in search of a myth. To fix these myths' meaning is to disable the hermeneutic possibility the space offers.

Myths from cultures outside the European tradition are often read as representing these cultures' "otherness." This often gives psychosocial writing from India the tone of the "empire writing back" (Ashcroft 1989) and perpetuates a kind of unconscious boosterism in Indian psychoanalytic writing. However, there is too much heterogeneity within culture both across time, space, gender, and religion to arrive at such monolithic readings. Official culture tends to institutionalize univocal readings where a particular official version dominates and erases a series of variations, which allow glimpses of different impulses and tensions that course through any particular moment in culture. The great Indian folklorist and anthropologist A.K. Ramanujan's extraordinary essay, "Three Hundred Ramayanas" (1999 [1987]), which celebrates the plurality of oral culture, was removed from the syllabus of Delhi University in 2011 at the behest of the populist-nationalist Indian government in favor of promoting the illusion of one sacred version of the story. To look at official versions of myths or to see mythological figures as unitary representation imposes a Eurocentric reliance on the written word and the revealed notion of truth. The official Hindu scriptures, like the authorized version of the Bible, tend toward a somewhat less heterogeneous representation, while oral sources of folk culture reveal

what is often a wealthy promiscuity. With its demotic energy and refreshing distance from the official version, folk culture initiates a dialogue between art and life, myth and history, men and women.

In this paper, we will look briefly at the cult and conundrum of one particular mother goddess in one region of India. In the Hindu pantheon, the mother goddess Durga occupies the central matriarchal position. Durga has many “avatars” or manifestations. Each aspect or attribute has a different name and is invoked differently: She is also Parvati, the mighty Lord Shiva’s consort (in the Hindu Trinity, he represents the omnipotent destroyer). As Shakti, she stands for power and is said to be the female aspect of Lord Shiva. She is the black and angry Kali as well as the golden Gauri. As Durga, she is the fiery slayer of demons, as Kali (etymologically derived from “time,” but popularly associated with “blackness”), she stands for death and has to be appeased through blood and slaughter. She is both the docile Uma and the demoness who destroys evil. Hindu iconography — especially in nineteenth-century Bengal — is rife with fierce and grotesque images of Kali.

According to Wendy Doniger, “Kali’s origins can be traced to the deities of the village, tribal, and mountain cultures of South Asia who were gradually appropriated and transformed, if never quite tamed, by the Sanskrit traditions. She makes her first major appearance in Sanskrit culture in the *Devi Mahatmya* (*The Glorifications of the Goddess*, c. 6th century CE). Kali’s iconography, cult, and mythology commonly associate her not only with time but also with sexuality, violence, and, paradoxically, in some later traditions, with motherly love” (2021 [1995]). While these contradictory versions may be read as an expression of either psychic confusion or complexity, I suggest confusion as an intolerance of complexity. While confusion suggests a primitive chaos, complexity suggests a self-conscious embracing of the inherent nature of emotional experience. If Kali implies death, maternal love, sex, and violence, perhaps this may be read as the signifier eluding the signified — evidence of the irrepresentable and evanescent nature of confused primitive experiences, rather than a more “mature” complexity — or tolerance of multiple and even contradictory impulses. Mostly, she is represented with a bloody, hanging tongue, wearing a necklace of skulls and dead infants as earrings. Her husband’s body, the mighty Lord Shiva, lies prone under her feet.

Read allegorically, this archaic mother may be seen as giving form to the infant’s primitive dread. She is reminiscent of what Erich Neumann (1955) calls the “Terrible Mother” archetype. In his study of the powerful female figures across culture, this very creative

disciple of Jung suggests that the archetypal feminine originates in the figure of Uroboros, which in Greek means the “tail-chewer.” To Neumann, this corresponds with the infant’s psychic state. This figure is undifferentiated but is later split into the three – the Good Mother, the Great Mother, and the Terrible Mother. He suggests that Gorgon is a manifestation of the Terrible Mother, Sophia of the Good Mother, and Isis of the Great Mother. Splitting this Uroboros figure into different expressions may be seen as a cultural expression akin to Melanie Klein’s (1946) idea of the infantile splitting between the good breast and bad breast, and/or Donald Meltzer’s (1967) “toilet mother” and “breast mother.”

To Bion (1965), the Oedipus myth is central to the architecture of psychoanalysis. But his reading of the myth radically decenters Freud’s; for Bion, the sexual content is not the myth’s outstanding feature. He breaks down some of the myth’s features, among which he mentions Oedipus’s pursuit of the truth which, despite intimidation, exhibits a scientific spirit; the Sphinx, who shows death to be the price for curiosity; Tiresias’s equivocation as being akin to man’s capacity for lying to protect against pain, and so on. The myth tells a story that is like the “realization” (emotional experience) of a “preconception” (a priori unconscious assumptions). Here, Bion adapts Kantian ideas to organize the myth as a preconception – something that already exists in the unconscious (prophecy often plays that role in mythology), but which has yet to come to pass (realization). Humankind will be persecuted for wanting to know the truth (Oedipus, Adam and Eve, Tower of Babel) and will evade the truth to protect themselves from pain (Tiresias, Jocasta, disavowal). In his reading, Bion sees each character as either denying or equivocating or confronting the truth. This has an allegorical power like in Freud’s reading, but sexuality appears secondary to emotional truth. Bion’s use here, as Lacan’s mentioned earlier, are all instances of reinterpreting Freud’s use of the myth.

In constantly revising his own understanding of the Oedipus story, Freud invites more interpretations rather than forecloses them. As mentioned above, the Narcissus myth stands like an unresolved cliff in the Oedipal landscape. There is something about how Freud uses myths that invites us into a hermeneutic position rather than one where we are passive recipients of an oracular pronouncement.

The psychoanalytic use of mythology invites constant reinterpretation akin to the folk uses of the Mother Goddess Durga in nineteenth-century Bengal. There was an overwhelming use of Durga iconography in this epoch, used as a vehicle to communicate something new in what was once called the “structure of feeling”

(Williams 1954). This now old-fashioned term relies upon the idea that any given historical moment is constituted dynamically by contesting sets of thoughts and feelings. Raymond Williams's term has a certain resonance with a tripartite structural understanding of the mind. The mind is never united but always carries dissidence, where one voice may become dominant for some time while others from the past (residual) and the future (emergent) contest it. I also suggest that this way of looking at culture may be extended to the psyche, where different epochs co-exist. Folk culture actively adapts the mythological orthodoxies to its own ends. In this sense, it is free of the need to depict the mighty god Shiva or Hara as omnipotent. We see how mythology provides a kind of scaffolding that the psyche may adapt for its own purpose.

Mythology appears to be used as a malleable space, especially in folk culture, when the variables that constitute it are used to give shape to unrepresented emotional states. Folk culture harnesses this space for what is yet unrepresented and for what is not contained in the changing landscapes. This paper captures a dialogic aspect to the myths of Kali, where culture, like the individual, speaks back to myth and what emerges is a living, if noisy and often dissonant playground. Furthermore, if we consider myths to be about the unrepresentable parts of the psyche and attempt to communicate the unrepresented and unrepresentable parts of the psyche, mythic images must be discontinuous as they are forever trying to fill the psyche's empty holes. In looking at the folk poetry that emerged around the Goddess Kali and her avatars in and around the nineteenth century, I find that this discontinuous presentation communicates a desire to interpret that which eludes comprehension. I believe that both folk culture and the unconscious work with existing constants to adapt them to their needs and give shape to what is shapeless.

Just as Lacan and Winnicott antagonistically theorize the baby's relationship to the mirror, so do the evocations of this great archetypal mother goddess act as locutions from a range of different psychic postures. There are at least four different psychic responses to this goddess figure: aggression toward her dreaded parts, splitting her into a helpless child bride to enable love, affectionately mocking her bizarreness, and seeing her as providing a fluid space that offers herself up for any interpretation that the beholder chooses. The historical shifts in the mother goddess's representation appear to correspond to the psyche's movement from dread to depression. But the poems suggest that there can be responses beyond dread and domesticated love; the response can be one of playfulness reflected in the figure's ironic representation, and finally a stance where the



beholder can acknowledge the object as a creation of their own subjectivity and embrace their role as Hermes, with a self-reflexivity that is absent from the other positions.

## 1. Dread

Psychoanalysts such as Freud, Jung, Lacan, and Winnicott each imagine the mother-child dyad in their own way. Somewhat uniquely, Klein (1946) foregrounds the maternal image's incohesive representation that is brought about by active psychic splitting. Until she elaborates Freud's use of the term splitting, we see the dyadic relation in terms of repression. But long before entering the realm of forbidden desires, the infant is confronted by a vast, bewildering world that threatens to annihilate them. The infant is unable to tolerate the good and bad feelings that are caused by their inside and outside, but they need to retain mother's goodness, for which she is cleaved in two. The primitive psyche attempts to cling to the good object, which is loved, while it attempts to get rid of the bad one. This refused part acquires a terrifying dimension, one that is also experienced as unsustainable and at some point, may usher in a tolerance for pain. In Kleinian terms, this psychic movement is described as one from a paranoid-schizoid position to a depressive position. It is only when the ego can tolerate bad feelings in itself that it is able to bear its own unwanted parts and feel the pain it has caused to its loved object.

Klein, like Freud, draws attention to the psychic disturbance caused by the confusing and often opposing feelings that the loved object arouses in us. And this is not met with Freudian ambivalence (where love and hate jostle against each other); rather, it is responded to with a violent splitting. Klein imagines psychic splitting as developmentally crucial, but also as a problem if it is the only psychic strategy for dealing with frustrating experiences. This decontaminatory impulse underlies the constant splitting of both objects and self. If we follow the Kleinian distinction, then the infant needs to get rid of all the bad feelings (projection) and sensations onto an external object (bad breast) to feel secure about the existence of a good internal object (good breast). In a somewhat different vein from Klein (internal breast), Jacqueline Rose (2018) chronicles the cultural and literary instances of cruelty against mothers. Rose observes that the psychic rage against a disappointing world is redirected against the figure of the external mother. We can read such cruelty directed at the stepmother in fairy tales as well as Sphinx, Medusa, Putana, and Kali as the equivalent of the bad breast in the cultural

imaginary. Similar versions of splitting have been observed in Ramanujan's (1999) distinction between the "tooth goddess" and the "breast goddess" in Hindu mythology, and again in Meltzer's (1967) distinction between the "breast mother" and the "toilet mother." Meltzer distinguishes the mother who feeds and nourishes from the mother who is used as a space for evacuation. Goddess Durga's avatars seem like an obvious instance of psychic splitting.

The festival in Bengal celebrated as Durga Puja devotes one day to each of the nine goddess avatars. This distinction suggests a splitting of the mother goddess into disparate aspects—Parvati, Durga, Kali, Uma, Skanda, Bhagvati, Bhavani, Ambika, Lalita, Gauri, Kandalini, Java, Rajeswari—and may also suggest these aspects' severe incompatibility. Durga's multiple aspects point to a primitive ego that sees its object in such disparate and fragmented ways. The different names of this mother goddess appear to reflect on the "feminine imaginary"—together the aspects that are collectively imagined variously as the feminine, a space for otherness.

When Durga and her consort are represented as Shiva and Shakti, Verena Kast observes that they "are everything to each other and their relationship completely excludes the outside world. . . . They present an image of ideal love and this image is encountered again and again when we are seized by love" (1986: 236–37). But as Kali, the goddess mates with her husband Shiva when he is a corpse.

Poetry about Kali (McDermott, 2001) seems to emerge in the seventeenth century. Rachel Fell McDermott collects poetry written by the *dewans*, financial managers to some of the important aristocratic families, who were perhaps asked to write Sakta poetry—a Bengali collection of poems that emerged in the mid-eighteenth century that address Kali with a new language of intimacy. Much of the folk song and poetry at the time seems to capture a bemused response to the unknowable and terrifying mother. One of the most famous of these poems describe her thus:

Her breasts, plump and jutting out,  
 and the rest of Her monstrous body  
 are covered with rivers of blood. I see Her  
 children's corpses at Her ears, a half-moon on Her forehead, naked.  
 This woman plays on the battlefield, Her left hands holding a sword  
 and a head...  
 (Mahdrjdhdhirdja Mdhtdbcdnd, quoted by McDermott, *ibid.*: 21)

Instead of being soft and milky, here the breasts are full of blood and aggressively "jutting out." Even though most myths seem to

suggest that Kali adopts this aspect to destroy evil, the iconography depicts her as frenzied in her violence. Her children's corpses are strung around her neck as a garland. This is explained away as her being an avenging deity on behalf of her children. But the affective response is communicated more powerfully in the visual representation of a terrifyingly filicidal figure. Even if she is on the battlefield, killing on behalf of her dead children, this figure is psychically undifferentiable. These children could well be collateral damage of her murderous frenzy. Suffice to say, this is a murderous mother, a primitive Clytemnestra or Medea. According to David R. Kinsley (2003), until it was prohibited in 1835, Kali worship also involved human sacrifice. The described parts (breasts, ears, forehead, left hand, etc.) seem to form an agglomerated picture of pure dread—they do not cohere but are roughly put together into an image that is incoherent and discontinuous.

At a more obvious level, this hideous aspect seems to indicate an aggressive relationship with the mother/goddess as she becomes a receptacle for unwanted and hated parts. In an early psychoanalytic reading of Kali, Ray Chaudhuri writes,

we find that all the grotesque aggressive endowments of the Kali are projections of aggressive feelings derived from the various early stages of oral, anal, urethral, and phallic phases of psycho-sexual development through which the human child is destined to pass. The gnashing teeth, the protruding tongue, the blood flowing by the sides of the cheeks, show the projection of the early cannibalistic oral phase of the child onto its mother figure. Her naked dancing figure of destruction, with locks of hair flowing at Her back, only show the possession of Her dynamic strength and Her readiness for Her aggressive pursuits. Complete blackness of Her skin is an overall investment of the mother figure with cruelty and ill-feeling. These are expression of projection from the anal-sadistic phase of the child. The blood that flows down Her body, from the freshly severed human heads and hands, is derived from the projection of the urethral phase. The erected sword, the girdle of human hands, the earrings of human infants are derived from the projection of the phallic phase of aggression. She is out to eviscerate, and mutilate, that is, symbolically to castrate. (Chaudhuri 1956: 137)

Chaudhuri creates a classical psychoanalytic vocabulary that deftly brings together Freud, Klein, and Karl Abraham. But here the emphatic association is one of the primitive projection mechanism, as Klein writes about it:

From the beginning the destructive impulse is turned against the object and is first expressed in phantasied oral-sadistic attacks on the mother's breast which soon develop into onslaughts on her body by all sadistic means. The persecutory fears arising from the infant's oral-sadistic impulses to rob the mother's body of its good contents, and the anal-sadistic impulses to put his excrements into her (including the desire to enter her body in order to control her from within), are of great importance for the development of paranoia and schizophrenia. (Klein 1946: 98)

This may easily be interpreted as the archaic object that terrifies the infant with her abundant power over him. But confronted by this uncanny figure, the explanatory discourse around it feels like an attempt to domesticate primitive dread.

Historically, it seems that this earlier Sanskrit tradition of Kali's reign of terror undergoes a transformation in later Bengali Sakta poetry, which has more of a vibrant folk origin. The tyrannical state of mind evoked by the Terrible Mother (to use Neumann's term mentioned earlier) seems to give way to a somewhat more flexible state of mind. But I will attend to this trope of transformation later, from a psychoanalytic vertex as a response to an enigmatic and unknowable object.

Psychically, from absolute dread we can see an occasional move toward capriciousness. In some of the folk songs, Kali is seen as a "capricious" but nevertheless "compassionate figure who acts to save her devotees from ignominy. Interestingly, the frightening skulls, severed arms, and glistening blood that she wears on her body are beautified by the addition of jewels and tinkling bells, details..." (McDermott 2001: 5). These jewels and ornaments on the frightening goddess may be gestures of appeasement, a sort of weak effort to ameliorate the violence. When the ego discards its own parts (good or bad), it feels depleted. Having been depleted and feeling thinner, the ego also wants the good parts returned. It is now wary of retaliation from an omnipotent mother. The "lost parts too feel lonely," Klein (1963: 302) observes movingly. When these lost parts return, or when the ego seeks to restore itself, these parts may be re-introjected and the attacked object restored after reparation.

But when the immature ego tries to repair the damage it has caused, it sticks it back together without really being able to put it back the way it was — it becomes a pseudo-reparation. If splitting is a fundamentally violent hewing, what it seeks to leave behind is a spectrum of emotions that the psyche finds more painful — loss, grief, mourning, helplessness. Bion (1962) imagines the primitive mind as

deeply and violently intolerant of emotional experience. This may be seen culturally as an intolerance of emotionality: forms of hate (war, drones, bombs) are seen as active, strong, and potent, while emotions are seen as excessive, feminine, emasculating. This is also linked with the splitting of the psychic and the material needs (*ibid.*: 10–12)—where psychic needs are split off, material needs become more insistent. This splitting may be more keenly observed in cultures where the bifurcation of gender is more rigid, and the relationship between the masculinized and the feminized more conflictual.

The cult of a mother goddess who is known by various names is intriguing in and of itself. These attributes — gentle, omnipotent, fierce, provocative, nurturing, helpless, terrifying — are associated with the overwhelming experience and become confusing. The object becomes confused with all the feelings it arouses in the subject. The Kali figure is attributed with traits that are both psychically associated with masculinity and femininity — especially for the mind's primitive part, which then splinters this omnipotent object (an object that evokes complex feelings). The figure's presence is reminiscent of Klein's (1975 [1929]: 210–18) idea of the combined object of early infantile fantasies. Father and mother are undifferentiable and provoke in the baby both dread and powerful wishes to intrude. When there are too many confusing feelings in us, these often get expelled with violence.

Furthermore, Bion (*ibid.*: 11) suggests that if the object has been rejected with violence, there may be just a spray of fine particles that cannot be re-introjected and made coherent. Instead, these particles may stick externally, or get incorporated (eaten up), so they form a “bizarre object”—a confused combination of unwanted parts, some of which also get mixed with the refused projections and bits of superego. The image's incongruity resembles an object that seems to be a patchwork of stuck and leftover parts, which adhere loosely without cohering, as they seem to have been stuck together without having a common purpose. This makes the object's internal representation quite incomprehensible.

The unfamiliar world the baby is plunged into induces very strong emotions, which they experience violently, precisely because as yet they have no capacity to tolerate the “violence of emotions” (Bergstein 2020: 1–27). The images of Kali make for a grotesquely powerful representation that capture the terror of the baby who is confronted by an upsurge of strong feelings. In Kali's representation, we see that to sustain its fiction of omnipotence, masculinity violently ejects its unwanted parts onto the feminine.

Interestingly, however, the frightening aspects are somehow accompanied by ornaments. There appears something incongruous in

an image of a bloody deity who is bejeweled, but whose ornaments smell of blood and sacrifice. Capriciousness is very different from ambivalence. Caprice points to arbitrariness, and it may even signal cruelty. The idea of disguise recurs in these poems:

You're a stony girl, terrible illusion,  
dressing in many guises.  
For different methods of prayer You put on  
the five chief forms.  
(Ramprasad Sen, McDermott 2001: 40)

Here, the poet soothes the emotional confusion by recognizing different aspects of mother as disguises, the different clothes she wears. Some poems suggest she is being willfully misleading, but here it is seen as purposive. And yet disguise suggests superfluous changes. In the final section, we will look at the idea of transformation that more sophisticatedly acknowledges the role of subjectivity in the response to the object.

In the case of the mother goddess Durga, while each avatar may be seen as a split-off part, the festival and the idea of avatars themselves suggest a continuity. Thus arises a very fecund space, where splitting and bridging are in a dynamic relationship with each other. In McDermott's collection of folk songs, there is an alternating and simultaneous rhythm that emerges as the ego struggles to discard things that cause pain and then feels the loss and tries to regain these. In the following section, we look at the splitting that makes some room for sadness, pain, and longing. But this melancholic sadness, and even occasional strain of loss and mourning is reserved for a split-off part of the object, thus making for a quasi-depressive state.

## 2. Longing

Child marriage in India remains a sociocultural practice despite being banned since 1929. In fact, since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a 5 percent increase in their rate of frequency (Desai 2021). These are conducted surreptitiously and even in infancy. So, what makes this such a compelling practice?

Is it the presence of a little baby burgeoning into a woman too unsettling for the father and the other men in the family? In addition to the sexual unease caused by the pubertal body, the young girl's expulsion through marriage may be an attempt to evade a catastrophic encounter with emotional experience itself. This rigidity we see in

more binarized cultures (of masculinity and femininity) perhaps corresponds with greater intolerance of emotional encounters. The feminine continues to be a space that carries the unwanted parts of the self in a culture that values instrumental reason and action.

The little girl who is married off as a child finds mythological equivalence in Durga as little Gauri/Uma. Uma apparently represents the most unthreatening aspect of Durga — a prepubescent girl child who stands at one end of the spectrum where the fierce Kali stands at the other end. In this section, we look at the longing and melancholia that center around the parting from and loss of young girls. The genre of songs celebrating her loving and loveable aspect is called *Umasangit* in Bengal.

In “The Exercise Book,” a short story by the Nobel Laureate Rabin-dranath Tagore (2010 [c.1891]), the protagonist, Uma, is a little girl of eight — an obvious nod to the mythical figure. Uma’s desire to learn is aborted by her elder brother, who soon arranges her marriage to a pedantic older man. Child marriage and the consequent expelling from her natal home seem to control the fate not just of women, but also the purity of the bloodline. The story ends with Uma rushing to hear and record a beggar woman’s song:

Townspeople come calling, “Uma’s mother!  
Here comes, behold, your long-lost star.  
Half-crazy at the tiding,  
Rushes out the queen. Where is my Uma? Where, where?”  
. . . Uma stretches her arms at one  
Around the neck of her mother,  
Sobbing with her pride so hurt. . . ?  
(*ibid.*: 52–53)

This embedded song fragment tells of maternal longing where a mother is “half-crazy” for her little daughter given away in marriage. This folk version of the myth is inflected with history. It has accommodated the practice of child marriage pervasive in nineteenth-century India. The songs that flourished during this period in Bengal revived the mythology of Uma through the community’s own experience of the loss of daughters. Folk culture imaginatively elaborates mythology in the celebration of a festival where different aspects of the goddess are worshipped, moving from fear to tenderness, to loss and longing.

McDermott writes of a particular moment in Bengal where in the privileged sect of Kulin Brahmins child marriage was rampant in order to preserve the lineage’s sanctity and superiority: “If a daughter

of a Kulin family didn't wed into a Kulin family, then the parent family loses their Kulin identity" (2011: 76). What we do find in and through the songs of Uma is the strain of loss and longing that follows the exiling. While child marriages were abolished by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and other reformers in the 1920s, they not only remain, but the evocative emotional experience exceeds the practice's banning. This is a part of the cultural imaginary as it is not specific to a historical practice but embodies a deeply embedded matrix of relationships. Daughters still leave their natal homes to live in their marital homes. The nostalgia (*nostos* [home] + *algia* [pain]) for a lost home is one of the *Umasangit's* underlying moods. At the end of the nine-day festival, the idols that take months to make are immersed in the holy river. The mother is not burned (although the effigies of the "evil" mythological figures are), but she is bid an emotional farewell. This often coincides with the daughters returning to their marital homes and bidding farewell to their parents.

Tagore's story works at three levels. Uma is a very specific little girl, but she is also the young Kulin Brahmin girl child, and finally, she also has a mythical resonance as the gentle aspect of the mother goddess Durga — while being intensely intimate, she is also "typical." It very nearly approximates the Lukácsian ideal of the typical story where the personal condenses and vivifies the social moment (Lukács 1971 [1916]). This particular girl is one version of the goddess who is worshipped, dreaded, and exiled.

The extant poems collected by McDermott (2001) reflect a range of responses to the figure of Durga. Some poems imagine the mother Menaka pining for her daughter in a melancholic strain as she accuses the husband of being stonehearted. Once again, this is a moment when the myth is brought alive by a recognition of women's helplessness in the domestic economy:

My little girl's name is Tara  
 and so are the pupils in her three eyes.  
 She's in my heart; in order to see her  
 I must shut my own two eyes  
 streaming with tears.  
 Uma was the child I nursed!  
 She used to cry out "Ma Ma!"  
 Oh Mountain of Stone,  
 Siva has no mother or father;  
 how can he understand a mother's pain?  
 To whom can I tell my sorrow?  
 (Andha Candi, McDermott 2001: 129)



In other poems, the reunion of the mother and daughter is imagined as gentle: “The Queen takes Gauri on her lap / and says sweet words to her / ‘My Umi golden creeper, Mrtyunjay lives in the cremation grounds. I die in grief over him, and also over you and me, being separated’...” (Ram Basu, *ibid.*: 138). Her tender feelings are part of the mourning as she has lost her child forever, but she relives that sense of loss and longing in the annual visitation.

The callous father/husband trope recurs as Menaka reimagines her son-in-law Mritunjay, the mighty Lord Shiva, not in omnipotent glory but as a vagabond. He is no handsome Lord but a good-for-nothing old man who has to till the land for a living, and who fritters away his money in drunken sprees. The daughter is imagined as unhappy with him, and her parents grieve over their son-in-law. In one such poem, the mother tries to cajole her husband (now referred to as Mountain Kin) to fetch their daughter from the no-good husband (Shiva/Hara). In the lines quoted below, the mother reminds her negligent husband of the grieving daughter who shares her ominous husband with another wife (Shiva was also married to the River Ganges):

Hey Mountain Kin, Gauri is sulking.  
Listen to what she told Narada in anguish-  
“Mother handed me over to the Naked Lord  
and now I see she has forgotten me.  
Hara’s robe is tiger’s skin,  
his ornaments a necklace of bones,  
and a serpent is dangling in his matted hair.  
The only thing he possesses is dhutura fruit.  
Mother, only you would forget such things.  
What’s worse, there’s the vexation of a co-wife  
which I can’t tolerate.  
How much agony I have endured!  
...your daughter has become a beggar  
just like her husband.”  
(Kamlakanta Bhattacharya, *ibid.*: 126-27)

Yearning for her daughter, the mother bemoans the absence of anyone she can turn to (Andha Candi, *ibid.*: 129). It is not unusual to find such expressions of maternal helplessness. The mother is imagined as guilty, longing, helpless, and complicit in turn. In the Menaka/Uma dyad there is mostly a tenderness, and an overlap of feelings. Uma also embodies the child version of Menaka. The longing maintains the splitting-off of the Goddess Durga as Uma,

but there is also an attempt to address the mental problem of splitting — which version is mine? And does the mother lose Uma when she becomes Kali? How can that sweet, gentle, innocent child also be the black, orgiastic, psychopathic killer? How to reconcile the golden and beautiful Gauri with the black Kali? The following lines articulate this conundrum:

Mountain whose woman have you brought home...  
This isn't my Uma... this woman is frightening —  
and she has ten arms.  
(Rasikcandra Ray, *ibid.*: 142)

This extract can be read as how the prepubescent girl has returned now as a woman, and the changes in her evoke something uncanny. Having been exiled into marriage, the girl child Uma has become “frightening.” Is she still like us or is she contaminated by the alien other? Is there unconscious guilt at this expulsion? Is this an expression of retaliatory anxiety? There certainly seems an emotional confusion at so many possible feelings all mixed incoherently. Her “ten arms” like tentacles seem to represent omnipotence — an attribute that is both reassuring as well as threatening. How did the gentle, hapless girl child get transformed into such a threatening figure of fury? Such questions have tremendous psychic significance and point toward weak integrative gestures. This is the experience of the uncanny that forbids embracing the object — the most loved and familiar object appears in a changed light and fills the self with dread and fear of the object.

Interestingly, one of the poems attempts to explain the splits: “Uma thought so hard about Siva’s habits that she turned into black Kali” (Isvarcandra Gupta, *ibid.*: 97). The girl who is sent away haunts the psyche as imbued with hurt and is at times seen as a figure of retribution. Other explanations suggest it is her cohabitation with an undesirable son-in-law. Has she taken on his aspect? This movement toward integrating exists alongside splitting, but it is not quite able to integrate and is frozen into a quasi-depressive position. Confronted by this enigmatic object, these questions are crucial to entering a hermeneutic position. This object asks to be interpreted but resists any fixed meaning.

McDermott (2011) describes a poignant moment where psychic pain, history and culture intersect unconsciously. One of the craftsmen tells her the pain he feels when the idol is ready to leave his home, where for months he has lovingly adorned it only to then release it into the public domain. The large figure leaves an empty

space in his home but it also feels like the loss of a loved object (ibid.: 95). This figure collapses the mother and the daughter into one powerful emotional experience of separation and loss.

### **Ironic Position**

So far, it seems that the body of literature that deals with the cult of the mother goddess draws upon both splitting and reparative processes. Klein writes, "I would also say that the early ego lacks cohesiveness and that a tendency towards integration alternates with a tendency towards disintegration, a falling into bits. I think that these fluctuations are characteristic of the first few months of life" (1946: 99). The primary impulse seeks to expel the bad sensations felt from within. But this denudes the psyche, and it searches for its now-lost parts. If these are taken as belonging to the self, this makes for a depressive position—one where the self mourns the damage it has caused to the other. These "fluctuations" may be seen in the rhythms of the cultural imaginary and perhaps are present through life, not just in the "early ego."

Is the presence of the other always evocative of fear? Is the absence always filled with longing? Is the psychic state always located on an axis of dread and pain? In some folk songs and poems, the incongruous images of the goddess are responded to playfully, and there appears to be room for irony. In fact, we are close here to the cadences of Winnicott's (1989 [1971]) voice as he observes the significance of the ludic space. The mother/analyst who can create a space for the baby/patient within which there can be a spontaneous engagement becomes, in and of itself, the basis for a creative relationship to the other. Unlike Klein's play technique which is "serious," Winnicott imagines playing as a non-instrumentalist form of relating. He does not always see playing as an expression of rage or jealousy, nor is it an unrelated masturbatory activity. This engenders what I have termed the ironic position, which is located at a distance from where things may be observed. Here bizarreness gives way to incongruity. The mood shifts from dread to amusement:

What a joke!  
She's a young woman from a good family  
yes, but  
She's naked—and flirts, hips cocked when She stands.  
With messy hair  
roars awful and grim

this gentlewoman tramples demons in a corpse-strewn battle.  
(Ramprasad Sen, McDermott 2001: 22)

She is a “young woman from a good family,” but she is “naked — and flirts, hips cocked when she stands. . . .” She is bleeding, drunk, and bloodthirsty. All codes of sex and violence are breached with impunity. Here, the goddess is imagined as a respectable bride sent to her husband, but who returns looking sexually provocative and unhinged with violence. This description corresponds to legends of the dreaded and murderous Shiva who killed his father and used his severed head as a begging bowl:

Holding the skull of Brahma in one hand and with Visvaksena’s corpse slung over his shoulder, Bhairava went on toward Varanasi (Benares) begging, dancing in mad elation, himself emaciated to the bones, an abject, penitent god on his way to liberation. Bhairava, Siva’s dreaded shape of fear, is in this image more awful than even the Puranas describe him. Carved in white marble, he dances, staggering with exhaustion. A long garland of severed heads accompanies his gaunt shape, winding in and out the hollows of the sculpture like a crazed serpent. (Kramrisch 1981: 34)

This ominous Shiva in folk poetry of this time is invoked as a hemp addict, more dissolute than dreadful:

How are you faring, Uma,  
at home with that beggar Hara?  
I know he’s crazy; what does he have for money?  
He wanders from house to house begging.  
Hearing of my son-in-law’s state,  
my chest splits with grief.  
(Ram Basu, McDermott 2001: 139)

As the husband of a young girl, Shiva is seen irreverently as an ineligible husband, and financial insolvency is strung into mythology. When this is articulated with wonderment and even delight, it goes beyond the Kleinian ideas of integration and reparation. The terrifying aspect has been detoxified and transformed into wonder. It is now closer to an enigmatic object that evokes all the emotions — terror and dread, adoration and disappointment, amusement and arousal. When the baby beholds their mother, they are awed by her beauty and it is the power of this experience, the magnitude of her beauty that terrifies them. But here the raw sexuality is added

to what Meltzer (1988) calls the “apprehension of beauty.” It might be added here that while Klein prioritizes terror and the paranoid response, Meltzer suggests that the baby’s awe came from the mother’s beauty and led to the conflict of whether or not to trust an unknowable object.

However, neither of these ways of imagining make room for the poems’ quasi-comical tone. There is space created for irony, which transforms grotesqueness into a domestic joke. This includes not just mother but also the primal scene where Syama (yet another name for Kali, both meaning blackness) is on top of her husband. This scene does not have the horror of the combined object mentioned previously, instead it could be a hilarious, drunken lyric sung irreverently about role reversal:

Sweating with the fun  
of reversed sexual intercourse,  
young Syama’s flesh thrills  
on top of young Siva,  
Her boat  
amidst the deep ocean of nectar.  
Her long hair reaches down to the ground.  
She is naked,  
ornamented with human heads and hands.  
Kamalakanta watches their beautiful bodies  
and sheds tears of bliss.  
(Kamlakanta Bhattacharya, McDermott 2001: 26–27)

The mother who strikes death in the heart and wears human heads around her neck is pictured here as the woman on top of the uber-masculine Shiva. The same image responded to with levity signals a radical shift in how the myth is being incorporated, made quotidian, and used as an interpretative space to represent the imaginary. In this primal fantasy, Syama is “sweating with fun.” This is surprising, given that the voyeur/child/poet is watching the scene of this archaic, homicidal, lustful mother on top of the fiery Shiva (here rendered young and docile). The experience makes the onlooker shed “tears of bliss.” This is a complex emotional experience that gathers together a diverse set of feelings. There is dread and awe but also a kind of intense experience: the terrible beauty of an incomprehensible love. The same poet in another poem accuses her: “You’re the murderer of Your own husband” (ibid.: 33). At an obvious level, this line of the poem refers to the popular version of Kali who has sex with her husband’s corpse. Popular iconogra-

phy of the goddess has her often standing atop the corpse of her husband Lord Shiva.

Folk renditions have a domesticating effect that seem to serve a very important psychic function in metabolizing primitive terror through humor, tenderness, and irony into a more bearable experience. From incredulity, the tone moves to tenderness, from the *unheimlich* it may shift toward the *heimlich*. The poem appears to be from an adolescent's point of view, appealing, somewhat matter of factly, to an ordinary, whimsical mother:

If instead of standing on Daddy  
You sat next to Him,  
exchanging Your fearful form  
for a sweet smile,  
if there were no blood smeared on Your body,  
You'd look so good—  
and there'd be no harm in it, Ma.  
What if Forgetful Daddy didn't lie  
like a corpse at Your feet  
but spoke to You honeyed words?  
Think how nice that would be!  
(Ma Basanti Cakrabartti, *ibid.*: 54)

## Hermeneutic Position

There is a whole cluster of songs that describe Kali as a figure who arouses consternation. This is rather different from being frozen in fear by the grotesqueness, or placating the goddess, as we have seen so far. Several poems begin with a sense of incredulity as for instance:

Who is She?  
Her loins are exquisite, and Her thighs  
streaming with blood  
(Ramprasad Sen, *ibid.*: 23)

or

Who is this drunk, black female elephant?  
(Dasarathi Ray, *ibid.*: 29)

or

Who is this delighting in war  
dancing naked with witches on the battlefield?  
(Raghunath Ray, *ibid.*: 24)

Three different poets, possibly unknown to each other, express a similar sense of incredulity at this incoherent and discontinuous figure who embodies so many bizarre attributes. Perhaps this incredulity and consternation can also give rise to the hermeneutic position, for interpreting can make the flux of psychic reality more bearable. While interpreting is arguably a constant unconscious activity, by hermeneutic position, I refer specifically to a conscious inhabiting of Hermes's role as interpreter and thereby the observation of the subjective nature of the act.

McDermott (2011) divides the Durga corpus into thematic clusters, one of which is "poems of transformation." The transformation trope often implies that the relation to the object is subject to change. This is already a big shift from the split nature of projections already discussed; disguise was a wily game. But other poems suggest that the masquerade is for her devotees' sake, in which she takes on the aspect required of her by others, for instance, she becomes fiery to protect her children. Here, the change is being acknowledged and given an interpretation that attempts to make a loving link.

Still, other poems take a self-accusatory turn, blaming themselves for their inability to see the fundamentally unchanging m/other. The poet who accuses her of being capricious in a previous lyric declares his own epiphany in another:

I finally get it—  
Siva, Krsna, and the black-bodied Syama  
they're all one  
but nobody else can see it.  
(Ramprasad Sen, *ibid.*: 42)

Here, the poet sees the changing forms not as wily tricks but as maternal responses to her children/devotees. This sentiment is the converse of the wily mother who disguises to mislead. It addresses her changing forms and brings them together. It is the speaking "I" who could not reconcile different aspects of his object. Reconciling different aspects of the object is acknowledged as emotionally difficult—"nobody else can see it." This idea that only the poet can see it momentarily frees the object from confusing projections and makes the emotional experience of the object a radically subjective

one: it is I who could not see. Subjected to the incertitude of their world, the ego finds an object that corresponds to their life's vicissitudes. The idea of transformation corresponds to this incertitude. This transformation is in the subject and no longer about the wily object who is grotesque and cruel. In such poems, the poet accesses himself as a hermeneutic being gifted with an epiphany. They have been blind so far but are now privy to a higher truth.

In a similar tone, there are lines from a song by Ramprasad Sen that recognize the different aspects of the goddess and reflect the omnipotence of the object who can take any shape that the mind wants:

Like the smile of a beast with bared teeth  
ascertaining the nature of Brahman is impossible.  
But the essence of my Goddess is Brahman,  
and She lives in all forms.  
The Ganges, Gaya, and Kashi  
even they are arrayed at Her feet.  
(Ramprasad Sen, *ibid.*: 43)

These lines acknowledge the experience of the object as extremely subjective and seem to suggest the other end of the spectrum from the paranoid-schizoid position with which we began.

In this state of mind, the object is recognized as indeterminate and malleable — one who takes on different aspects:

However a person conceives of You,  
You willingly assume that form:  
the Burmese call You Pharatara,  
the Europeans call You Lord.  
To Moguls, Pathans, Saiyads, and Kazis You are Khoda.  
Sakti for the Saktas...  
(Ramdulal Nandi, *ibid.*: 44)

The mother goddess is magical because of her capacity to become what the other needs her to be. Or, put another way, the mind sees in the other what it wants or needs. This is akin to Winnicott's "good enough" maternal object who allows herself to be used in the way the baby needs.

Kali and Uma appear as two of the most violently contrasting aspects of this puzzling, enigmatic figure split into Terrible Mother and Loving Daughter. We see how different images, songs, and local myths seek to "explain" or stitch together, as well as tear apart the figure. The psyche both denudes and then repairs, however partially.



This renders the object movable, fidgety, restless, and unfixed; open to being renewed and reimagined. Such fidgetiness gestures toward the ineffable that both seeks and refuses containment.

The reading of such “hyperbolic” and profuse images may be seen as an effort to represent the irrepresentable power of unmentalized emotions. This unknowability is projected into the other, in this case, the “dark continent”—femininity. Confronted by this, the subject seeks to either expel it (projection and splitting), yearns for an illusory wholeness (melancholia), mourns the inability to know it, learns to play with its capriciousness (ironic position), or acknowledges its unknowability and thereby occupies a hermeneutic stance, striving to interpret it as it appears, thereby inhabiting a space of extreme subjectivity.

Myths may then be read as spaces that offer themselves as “containers” when cultures are unable to dream their way out of dead ends and folk culture becomes a vehicle by which the unrepresented seeks representation. Bion (1965) distinguishes between objects’ variables and invariants, with the invariants allowing the object to be recognized. The myth in question here seems to offer some invariants—a mother, a daughter, separation, loss, dread. But the narrative opens itself to transformation and interpretation. Rather than see myths as invariants, which tell us about “cultural” truths, perhaps here we read them as enabling transformation through the reimagining of possibilities (*ibid.*). The Durga mythology provides a shape and structure in which unbound affects and/or unrepresented states find expression. And yet unless it is adapted to the shape of one’s own suffering, it fails to give psychic solace.

Finally, these lines also echo the relationship between psychoanalysis and mythology. Mythology—both in folk culture and in psychoanalysis—allows itself to be read according to the lens of the analytic school, to the extent that nothing really stays constant. A.K. Ramanujan expresses this idea about the malleability of mythology best while writing about oral traditions and folk culture, when he refers to a folk tale told about Aristotle in Europe and a philosopher in India:

The philosopher meets a village carpenter who has a beautiful old knife, and asks him, “How long have you had this knife?” The carpenter answers, “Oh, this knife has been in our family for generations. We have changed the handle a few times and the blade a few times, but it is the same knife.” Similarly... in a folktale that goes on changing from teller to teller. Any fixity, any reconstructed archetype, is a fiction, a label, a convenience. (Ramanujan 1999: 542)

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