

Vol 4 Issue 7 April 2015

ISSN No : 2249-894X

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*Monthly Multidisciplinary  
Research Journal*

*Review Of  
Research Journal*

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2249-894X

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ISAIAH SMITHSON'S USE OF THE GREAT MOTHER STRUCTURE  
AS METAPHOR OF SEARCH FOR SELF



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**ABSTRACT:**

The Great Mother structure provides a format for individuation of one's identity from its original cultural matrix. In the process it becomes a metaphor for the growth, discovery and emergence of an independent self. The idea of search and emergence of a self or its failure to emerge as a result of it requires a progressive pattern to give coherence and cohesiveness to the diachronic events. This coherence is achieved by employing the archetypal post-Jungian approach of Erich Neumann. Neumann draws upon Jung's idea of 'collective unconscious' as in the *Origins and History of Consciousness*, he shows that "human

consciousness evolves out of a state of unconsciousness, both in the species and the individual, the stages of this evolution are reflected in man's myths".

**KEYWORDS**

*The Great Mother Structure, Elementary, Transformatory, Terrible, Good, Dragon, Darkness, Cultural Matrix, Archetype, Self, Emergence, Submergence, Ego.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Great Mother structure provides a format for individuation of one's identity from its original cultural matrix. In the process it becomes a metaphor for the growth, discovery and emergence of an independent self. The idea of search and emergence of a self or its failure to emerge as a result of it requires a progressive pattern to give coherence and cohesiveness to the diachronic events. This coherence is achieved by employing the archetypal post-Jungian approach of Erich Neumann. Neumann draws upon Jung's idea of 'collective unconscious' as in the *Origins and History of Consciousness*, he shows that "human consciousness evolves out of a state of unconsciousness, both in the species and the individual, the stages of this evolution are reflected in man's myths" (Davis 225). Smithson observes that Neumann uses the myth of the "Great Mother" to describe "the evolution of consciousness" in terms of the ego's "emergence" from the unconscious, the two movements are "synonymous." Isaiah Smithson has used Erich Neumann's archetypal pattern in the progression of ego through narrative structure where Smithson shows that a version of individual consciousness that finally works free of the "Great Mother" has been developed or constructed by Iris Murdoch in his novel *A Severed Head*. Smithson has used the "Great Mother" structure of Neumann because he rightly believes that the twentieth century criticism has accustomed us to conceiving of the novel as "an extension of myth" and quotes Harry Levin, "the novel . . . contains the elements, and continues the functions, of myth" and Stanley Edgar Hyman, "literature is analogous to myth." Therefore, Smithson is not surprised to discover "that the patterns Neumann finds in mythodology and uses to develop his thesis are also found in a contemporary English novel . . ." (Smithson 226). This can be said to be true of any novel and specifically in modern Indian novels of Arun Joshi, who basically deals with a search for meaning in life through empirical experiences and conscious choice in multi-cultural situations showing an evolution of human consciousness from the most egoistic states to positions of critical self awareness which include an awareness of one's surroundings and of one's own depths or an awareness of one's inability to achieve such awareness.

The myth of 'Great Mother' provides the necessary form and stages to the differentiation of ego from its 'unconscious.' In this regard let us first go through the details of the Great Mother structure as consolidated by Smithson. The Great Mother, though it is represented as 'spatial' in mythology and art is actually "an inward image at work in the human psyche" (Neumann qtd. in Smith 227), an archetype of the collective unconscious which as a " 'primordial'" (3) image expresses "not the unconscious in its totality, but the unconscious so far as it is experienced by the emerging ego as the matrix to which it is related and from which it is distinguishing itself" (Smithson 227). Initially by an undeveloped ego, incapable of differentiation, the archetype is experienced as "ambivalent" as being simultaneously "Good and Evil, friendly and terrible" (12). In fact, the ego achieves its selfhood by being able to deconstruct such pairs.

The ambivalence of the archetype requires further elaboration in terms of its "Elementary" and "Transformative" (24) characters (Smithson 228). The Great Mother as Elementary is essentially "conservative" (26) as the "Great Round" or "Great Container" that "tends to hold fast to everything that springs from it and to surround it like an eternal substance" (26). The experience of the Great Mother elementary by the ego is that of the dependent child: "ego and consciousness are still small and undeveloped and the unconscious is dominant" (25). The transformative character in contrast to that of the elementary is "dynamic" (29) it drives the ego towards "development" and brings "movement and unrest" (30-31) in it (Smithson 228). Experiencing the "Great Mother" in its transformative form is required for the ego to liberate itself from the unconscious.

We see both the forms of the "Great Mother" can have positive or negative effects on the ego.

The "Elementary Great Mother" not only "withholds the ego, it also nourishes and protects it" while the Transformative Great Mother, "though it necessarily affects change, does not necessarily bring about improvement" (Smithson 228). It can lead the ego to "wholeness" but it is also capable of leading to the "destruction of the ego" (34). The ego can be "contained" in the Elementary form of the Great Mother by a "Good" or "Terrible" Mother and it can be "transformed" by either of them. The Great Mother then is complex structure, and the possible relations it may have with the ego are varied. The Great Mother can also be represented by a male because "the bi-sexual structure of the Uro-boric dragon shows that the Great Mother possesses masculine . . . features"; the 'aggressive' and 'destructive' features of the Great Mother, her function as a killer and her attributes having a "phallic" tree, "a corn God," "a fisher king" and a "magician" show her "masculine" manifestation (*Origin*, 155, qtd in Smithson 230). The various forms of Great Mother function as a variation of the symbol of the Great Mother and the emerging ego may experience its unconscious in more than one or through many "verbal constructs" as distinct components of one Great Mother symbol. These symbols appear as a related structure where the two forms are not antithetical but "interpenetrate" and 'combine' with one another in many ways (Smithson 232). This inter-penetration is true of the Good and the Terrible, the Elementary and the Transformative of the Great Mother structure.

The complexity of the Great Mother archetype represents the ego's difficulty in its differentiation from it. Ego's emergence from the Great Mother structure is implicit in the nature of that structure. This structure represents "symbolic self-representation of the dawn state" as the archetype of the "World Parents" (11) the union of "masculine and feminine opposites . . . joined in perpetual cohabitation" (13, 18) in "Uro-boric union" (Smithson, 226). This Uroboros has both 'a maternal' and 'a paternal' side. The ego's slumbering in the "perfect round" structure of the Unconscious as an 'undeveloped germ' shows the dominance of the maternal marked by a "procreative thrust" (18) (Smithson 226) a movement towards awakening as an influence of the paternal out of the presence, of the paternal and the maternal in the Great Mother structure of uroboric state of unconscious bliss, arises a motion that causes the ego to experience itself howsoever briefly, "The ego emerges like an island out of the ocean of the unconscious for occasional moments only, and then sinks back again. It is through this vacillation between unconscious slumber and sporadic awakening that the ego is born" (Smithson 226). Having achieved birth, the ego passes through four stages and three types of incest to become "heroic" and to achieve a "transmutation" of the Great Mother structure into "liberation of the captive" and ultimately marrying the maiden by slaying the dragon in Great Mother (Smithson 241). Here what the hero kills is only the "terrible side" (199-200) of the female and this he does in order "to set free the fruitful side" (Smithson 241). Smithson elaborates Neumann (from *Origins* 218) that the destruction of a dragon means the liberation of the captive. These stages are "complex" and "overlapping," "simultaneously" forming themselves and not merely "sequential." The four stages leading to the final dragon fight can be marked as "approximations", as attempts to represent verbally and spatially "a process the fluidity of which ultimately defies such analysis" (Smithson 226). These four stages are Horus—a 'child' to the mother i.e. ego contained in the Uroboric Great Mother. The ego by degrees becomes "the son lover" or Adonis of the Great Mother, in this relationship differentiation has occurred to the extent that the ego still exists as a "Phallic consort" (48) yet "very nearly becomes a part of the maternal unconscious." It progresses to the stage of the Struggler described as Hippolytus. In this stage the ego is struggling against the Great Mother managing to separate itself from Her, however, tenuously and finally, the ego emerges as "hero", "truly independent" (101) and capable of standing alone. These stages bring out the birth and the movement of ego in its differentiation from the unconscious involving a movement from passive acquiescence to active opposition.

Ego's emergence to its heroic stature is not easy. It is marked by "psychic gravitation" (Smithson

232) and "the rhythms of emergence." Neumann has defined psychic gravitation as the "tendency of the ego to return to its original unconscious state" (26)' (Smithson 232). Therefore, Neumann uses incest as a symbol to express the ego's relation to the Great Mother. The four stages comprise of three types of incest. According to Neumann, incest is often used to express the ego's "relation" to the Great Mother. There is first "Uroboric incest": the infantile ego's "continuous re-entry into the Great Mother" in order to be "dissolved and absorbed" (17). There is also "matriarchal incest: the adolescent ego's entry into the Great Mother." In the first incest ego represents the "child stage" where it wants to be "pleasurably protected" by the maternal depths while in the second the ego as son lover points to a desire to participate in "the death ecstasy of sexual incest" (60). This stage shows assimilation of the empirical experience into the structure of the unconscious and leads the ego to the third stage of the Struggler where the ego encounters what Jung calls its "shadow" or recognition of the opposite side or the repressed and the excluded part of itself. Facing one's shadow Jung calls in Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious" in *The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung*, ed Laszlo, 305, 316) an "apprentice act" in the process of soul-making or the fourth stage of emerging as a hero. This fourth stage comprises the third type of incest symbolically equivalent to the dragon fight: "by submitting to the heroic incest and entering into the devouring maw of the unconscious, the ego is changed in its essential nature and is reborn "another" (Smithson 241). All those stage are overlapping and interspersing rather than merely linear progression in a sequence. The mythic progression and stages in fact facilitate our understanding of the mental functioning of the ego.

The heroic incest involves battle or dragon fights which represent not just hero's emergence but a complex psychic event involving a process contributing to its maturation. Jung calls this process of facing one's "anima" a 'masterpiece act" (Jung 316) because it requires courage and complete 'tapering" of dependence either on the material world or one's support in one's unconscious structure represented by the Great Mother. According to Neumann, this fight with the dragon is a symbolic equivalent of "the descent to the cave, underworld or sea, of being swallowed, or of committing incest with the Great Mother" (154-55) and Smithson points out that each of these is "equivalent to the separation of the World Parents" or "the principal of opposites" (Smithson 227). It is a descent into one's own depths to individuate one's self, as the heroic ego succeeds in the "splitting of opposites" (103) from Uroboric unity. Neumann concentrates on this part by making it clear that coming to consciousness is essentially a leaving behind of the uroboric unity often symbolized as "paradise" or "the golden age" and becoming aware of "opposites" such as "inside and outside," "good and evil" (109), "I and you." These dragon fights "severe utterly" the ego's ties to the "primordial unity." This is 'in reality the fundamental liberating act of man which releases him from the yolk of the unconscious and establishes him . . . a conscious individual' (Smithson 227). In fact, these encounters display an emotional intensity and lack of "psychic gravitation," a "new strength" and "absence of the phenomena of psychic gravitation" (Smithson 235) because as Neumann points out 'the transformation of the hero through the dragon fight is a "transfiguration, a glorification indeed an apotheosis, the central feature of which is the birth of a higher mode of personality" (Neumann qtd. in Smithson 237).

But the successful encounter with the dragon is not an end in itself. The ultimate goal is "the beloved, the maiden in distress or the treasure hard to attain that the dragon ferociously guards" (Smithson 240). In fact all the symbols are synonymous except that the dragon represents the terrible side of the Great Mother. In this complex psychic event, as Neumann explains 'the destruction of the dragon means . . . the liberation of the captive" (218) (Smithson 241), accordingly, the hero's liberation of the maiden is a liberation of his own self. In effect Smithson points out that the hero's rescue of the captive corresponds to the discovery of "the psychic world" represented by "the freeing of the positive feminine elements" and its "separation" from the Great Mother by "the slaying of the dragon in whose

custody she [maiden] languishes," "what the hero kills is only the terrible side of the female" (Smithson 241). Therefore, discovery of soul, Anima or the captive maiden, in conjunction with the dragon fight is in effect a transmutation of an element of the Great Mother structure. These are aspects of a complex but same mental phenomenon "separable only by abstraction" (Smithson 240). Therefore, the form of myth is used because myths are basically serial presentations and hence, quite handy to convey or apprehend 'closely interwoven' events occurring 'simultaneously.'

In this mythical format search for self can be grasped as the attempts of protagonists to deconstruct their unconscious and evolve a textuality of their own self through their empirical formation of self in the world and deconstructing this formation in the 'having mode' by going into the disturbances of the deeper self to transform themselves into a 'being mode' as they are in control of themselves in relation to their unconscious and feel related productively to the humanity at large. This is the formation of self which Lacan would see internally as coming together of 'the manifest' and 'the unmanifest' or of 'the inscription from the unconscious' due to social positioning which again being punctuated and corrected by 'unconscious as a discourse' manifesting itself as a conflicting another 'inscription.' The internal dynamics of self of Lacan can be seen functioning together within the form, stages and serial presentation provided by the Erich Neumann's development of the Great Mother archetype as a myth. The search for self naturally takes the form of a mythical quest as the quest undergoes complex, psychic and mental phenomena in the evolving or dissolving of the self.

#### NOTES

Note: Smithson, Isaiah. "Iris Murdoch's A Severed Head: The Evolution of Human Consciousness." *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Modernism Through Post-Structuralism*. Ed. Robert Con Davis. New York: Longman, 1986. p.226. Print. Subsequent references to this article will be referred as Smithson.

Note: In borrowing the quotations of Neumann from Isaiah Smithson, we have retained Smithson's quoting page numbers of Neumann. He uses simple page numbers for *The Origins* and abbreviation GM along with the page numbers for *The Great Mother*. We have put Smithson's quotations from Neumann under inverted commas.

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