

## MENSTRUATION - CURSE OR BLESSING

*RosieK*

Backache, lethargy, exhaustion, sleeplessness, lack of co-ordination, nausea, dizziness, depression and violent fits of anger. Some women sail through their pre-menstruation time while many others suffer some or all of the above. Most women 'put up with it', they don't want to make a fuss about what is, after all a 'natural' event; and some keep quiet because, although this is the 1990's, menstruation is still a taboo subject and women often feel 'unclean' and ashamed about it. But just how bad is the pre-menstrual epidemic? And have women always felt like this about the subject?

In her Research Papers of 1964 and 1969, Katharina Dalton made some astonishing findings: "84% of violence committed by women were during the premenstruum; suicides increase during the premenstruum; five billion dollars are lost annually in the U.S. due to menstrual absenteeism; 45% of 276 acute psychiatric patients were admitted to hospital during the paramenstruum; of 91 children who attended surgery with minor coughs and colds, 53% were brought by mother during her paramenstruum; 'A' and 'O' level examination passes are lower for girls during menstruation; viral infections and accidents increase during premenstruum"<sup>10</sup> And so it goes on. It is also quite interesting to look at some of the legalities regarding menstruation. For instance, "The law of many countries treats menstruation during the commission of a crime as an extenuating circumstance." and that "Burial in consecrated ground was only granted to a suicide if she had been menstruating at the time of death."<sup>11</sup>

All this sounds extremely negative and one is left wondering if anything at all can be done about this. Many therapists today feel that much of the tension caused around this time could be alleviated if women were given more positive, instead of negative feedback on the subject. If we feel 'bad', are told we are 'bad', have to cover-up the fact we feel 'bad'. it can only lead to more 'bad' feelings and subsequent behaviour. If, on the other hand, women, and people who live and/or work with women understood why there is so much negativity on the subject and were given more positive images to work with, things might be very different.

In ancient times a woman's body was often depicted as 'The underworld', the source and conclusion of life. Within this world were two rivers; the white river of life and the red river of death. These can be attributed to the two flows that are released from the vagina, "The clear or white flow at the times when a child is more likely to be conceived; and the forbidden red flow of menstruation, when it is most unlikely that a child can be conceived."<sup>12</sup> At a time when many cultures became patriarchal, i.e. dominated by men, sex, at a time when children could be conceived was quite acceptable; however, a taboo against sex at menstruation became widespread, "throughout all cultures dominated by men, both historically and at the present time.." This, in turn, has led to a taboo, "which approves only that half of the woman's nature which is concerned with childbirth and pregnancy."<sup>13</sup>

But what of this, 'other half of woman's nature'? And if masculine dominated culture has suppressed it, can we look at a time before this in history to find any positive references to it?

In Robert Briffault's, 'The Mothers' much research was done into early cultures. "The first 'magic' was human fertility magic, and it was exercised by the women, who had, and have, the original power as priests, magicians, prophets and shamans. Briffault shows that the person of the menstruating woman is fraught with a strange power, which is thought of in some cultures as a kind of communicable disease, and in others a kind of shaman or magic holiness leading to prophetic fits and trances."<sup>14</sup>

In most early civilisations images of 'The great Mother' abound. White Goddesses, such as Artemis and Isis, dedicated to the childbearing nurturing side, and dark or black goddesses, such as Hecate, Kali and Lilith, representing the death and menstruation side. Many of the early goddess figures, such as Artemis and Isis were dual in nature and so representations of a Black Isis and Artemis were also worshipped. It may be of interest to note that within our Christian culture we often find images to a Black Madonna or black virgin; and, although these statues are often kept hidden in churches, homage is paid during a catholic mass on the continent to 'Sara de Kali', a goddess particularly associated with Romanies.

Many Temples of priestesses dedicated to Goddesses were active in Ancient Greece. The temples of Hera and the Sibylline colleges both contained mass menstrual rites. The Sibyls forming an oracle that prophesied once a month. So valued were these priestesses that, "No political action was ever taken even in classical Greece without consultation with the Sibylline oracle."<sup>15</sup>

Sexual union with priestesses of dark Goddesses was also a common practice resulting in a "whole-body orgasm that would take the consort into the visionary knowledgeable continuum. It was a rite of crossing, from which he would return transformed."<sup>16</sup> This rite was known as 'Horasis', and is where we get our word, 'Whore'. However it has little connections to the degraded view we have now. In the tantric temples of Hinduism and Buddhism, sexual practices and rituals are described in detail, resulting in, 'Karuna', "a combination of mother-love, tenderness, comfort, mystical enlightenment, and sex, that was dispensed by the devadasis of Hindu temples and the prostitute-priestesses in the Middle Eastern temples."<sup>17</sup>

Tantra is still practised today; in the west a magical order known as the 'O.T.O. continues many of its practices and rites. Kenneth Grant, the order's head discusses the magical attributes of the menstruating female: "The priestess sees 'clairvoyantly with her womb. . .this she does at the time of catamenia, when the astral forces are able to assume almost tangible form from the effluvia emanating from her vaginal vibrations."<sup>18</sup> And Aleister Crowley, a one-time member of the same order, "The best blood is of the moon, monthly'. . .At the period the 'cup' or 'chalice' of the woman would be full of a special kalas or energy that by intercourse could be turned to visionary or magical purposes: she would be 'the gate of the sun' (Babylon)."<sup>19</sup>

Whether we choose to believe that women have particular 'powers' during their menstrual cycle or not, the fact that, somewhere in the history of evolution primates decided to menstruate i.e. chose to be continually sexually available whether or not the production of offspring was inevitable. In other words, sex, other than a means of procreation became terribly important. "From the appearance of the menstrual cycle, therefore, dates all the evolutionary developments which have been seen as specifically human: viz. the development of mentality, symbolism {a 'mental child' is a symbolic child}, recognition and valuing of the individual, and social organisation."<sup>20</sup> In order to understand the above we could illustrate it by saying that: at the ovulation half of the cycle physical offspring can be produced and at the menstrual cycle, mental offspring, i.e. genes and memes

If menstruation truly is a time when human consciousness is, 'doing something else', this might explain the sudden frustration of a woman endeavouring to live in a 'normal reality'. In some of the primitive menstrual rites, "There appear opportunities for the woman to adopt as a custom some form of secluded meditation, to learn to enter deep within herself, ride a descent into the underworld, or into the dream-world, during her menstrual time"<sup>21</sup> Research has shown that lack of 'dream-sleep' produces effects similar to those of P.M.S. and that women who allowed themselves more time for seep and meditation lost many of the negative symptoms.<sup>22</sup>

Carl Jung, well-known for his studies in dream-work, explored menstrual symbols and dreams during menstruation. Some of his findings are detailed in, "The Wise Wound"<sup>23</sup>

Another Jungian analyst, working in America, Barbara Black Koltuv Ph.D., has utilised the archetype of 'Lilith', a black goddess from pre Sumerian origin, in her work with women, aiding them to balance this repressed side of their nature.

Originally Lilith, 'the maid of desolation' appears in Sumerian legend, building a house in a tree whose base has a serpent wrapped around it. She was associated with owls and serpents, representing a dark inner knowledge of the feminine. In the Sumerian legend the serpent is killed by a hero and Lilith tears down her home and flees to the wilderness. Koltuv's psychological interpretation of this is quite interesting.

"The sense of being cast out into psychological development is familiar in feminine psychology. As in many myths of women's individuation, there are the elements of surprise and force. Persephone

reaches for a flower and finds herself dragged kicking and screaming into Hades. Psyche, pregnant by Eros, seeks a glimpse of her baby's father, and finds herself adrift in the world facing all the difficult tasks of individuation. Women, unlike men, do not shoulder a knapsack and sword, mount a steed, and go forth to meet a heroic challenge. Rather more Lilith-like, they have no choice, they feel cast out and forced into consciousness."<sup>24</sup> Jung's interpretation of the myth is similar: "The woman simply blasts that house, and then she has no shelter whatever; she is left in the desert in darkness. . . Your see, before she can realise the nature of Tao, she must destroy all the ideas behind which she has been sheltered before."<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the centuries Lilith survived as a Goddess, finally being engulfed into Jewish mythology, where she sits today. The Jews kept her associations with serpents, creating her as the first wife of Adam, before Eve. Lilith fled the garden of Eden and became the Queen of darkness, residing in the wilderness. Later she became the serpent that tempted Eve, in the garden of Eden to pluck the fruit of the tree of individuation. In modern times Lilith is often viewed as Queen of Hell, Satan's bride, in that she resides over the demons residing in the psyche; i.e. all the negative habits and illusions one needs to acknowledge and work through before true individuation can occur. Her main implement is a mirror. And, although the Jews created her as a Demon, the Kabbalists, the mystical tradition of Judaism also refer to her as: "a ladder on which one can ascend to the rungs of prophesy."<sup>26</sup> Indeed on their symbol of the universe, a huge tree, mapping, amongst other things the journey of consciousness towards illumination, Lilith, in her guise as half-serpent, half-woman, is seen coiled around the very centre of its trunk; thus indicating the essential serpent-like wisdom needed for the very development of human consciousness.

As a symbol of the 'red' side of women Barbara Koltuv says of Lilith: "She is part of the Great Goddess that has been rejected and cast out in post Biblical times. . . she represents the body-instinctuality, and sexuality. In patriarchal times, woman is seen as vessel and mother, her sexuality is limited to the proscribed marital embrace, or idealised and spiritualized into Virgin . . . Lilith is neither. She is whore and earth. Her sexuality belongs to herself and to the Goddess."<sup>27</sup>

Although there are no magical or immediate antidotes to some of the criteria listed at the beginning of this essay; if our present-day society can be re-taught to view menstruation in a more positive light and give it some of the attention it surely deserves, perhaps less women will be pulling their hair out every month. . . or worse!