

**Dark sides of Femininity:  
Wars inside and outside Femininity - on the origins and dynamics of aggressivity  
and destructivity during women's life span**

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*“If there be light, then there is darkness; if cold, heat; if height, depth; if solid, fluid; if hard, soft; if rough, smooth; if calm, tempest; if prosperity, adversity; if life, death.” Pythagoras*

*“Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.” Mark Twain*

Trying at first to delimit the object of my paper, I will start quoting Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber:

“...one of the most profound taboos of our western civilisation, a form of female destructiveness in which intense wounds and humiliations culminate in boundless despair, rage, hate and revenge — extending even to the killing of one’s own children.”

I intend not speaking of female aggressiveness and destructiveness in general, but of a particular area of deep archaic and primitive destructive fantasies and acting out, which have been so well described already in the first millennium B.C. by the myth and Euripides tragedy of Medea.

In the story she takes vengeance on Jason, who left her for a Greek princess, by murdering his new wife and her father, as well as her own children. We may remind here the brilliant reproduction of Medea’s myth in Pier Paolo Pasolini movie with Maria Callas as Medea.

In Medea’s myth we come in contact with the primitive wild and dark power of female passionate love and hate, maternity, envy, jealousy and revenge, power and impotence. Medea is imprisoned in a vicious circle of compulsive repetition of the traumas, the sado-masochistic betrayals, she suffered.

Medea represents a pre-oedipal, symbiotic type of object relations, where a third is lacking and there is no separatedness. There is no potential space where to symbolize or mentalize intense affective experiences. There is a predominantly concrete pre-symbolic mental functioning, based on immediate acting out. The depressive position is not reached and a possessive power and control over the object is the only possibility, as Medea lives in her narcissistic fusional world governed by phantasies of omnipotent, magic power.

## Infanticide

For the first time E.S.Stern (1948) called *Medea complex* “the situation in which the mother harbours death wishes to her offspring”, when a mentally disturbed woman suffers infanticidal tendencies and revengeful feelings towards the child’s father. Rheingold (1964) presumes that all mothers, to some extent, nurture impulses to kill their children, so as Winnicott listed eighteen reasons for which mothers could hate their babies. (Winnicott, 1949)

Indeed, socially approved infanticide is a real terrifying ancient cultural and historical fact. Today it still often happens, but mostly as a criminal act.

“The fact that infanticide once was a general custom amongst practically all races and nations is a shocking discovery. Many reasons can be given for this sinister fact but all can be reduced to that of selfishness of the parents.” (Wellisch, E.2001) We may look at reasons deeper and more complex than selfishness, but the shocking fact remains.

Maternal infanticide was usually due to a craving for gratification of passions – like in Dionysian orgies, where women in ecstasy “tore their children apart and devoured the bleeding pieces. These were the sacramental *Omophagy*”. Father’s motivation for infanticide may had been “unwillingness to give up their absolute superiority for the benefit of their growing children”. (Wellisch, E. 2001)

Such an area of wild, archaic hateful aggressiveness and destructivity is one of the most difficult to be accepted and explored in everyday life, and it remains rather enigmatic in our culture and often a stumbling-stone in our clinical practice.

Already before I have discovered psychoanalysis, and its eternal questions on life and death, I was considering them through the “points of madness” of F. Dostoyevsky's and L. Tolstoy’s heroes/characters, who oscillated between the ‘Madonna’ ideal and the ‘ideal of Sodom and Gomorrah’. Literature and other arts provide us a tool for recognising and attempting to comprehend the wideness, deepness and complexity of the tragic, controversial and threatening psychic truth about human and in particulare female nature. The Russian philosopher G. Pomerantz (1990) writes about “the openness to the abyss”. Both mythological tradition and literature provide us with a rich continuum of metaphors and pave the way for a deeper psychoanalytic understanding of our patients’ and our own psychic life, to explore the darkest areas of unconscious.

In these areas we are dealing with very primitive and intense narcissistic needs, which – when frustrated - produce a terrible destructive aggressiveness, full of envy and hate. Such strong drives find a shape in wild fantasies that are deeply repressed because of their horrific contents and threatening concreteness.

I recognized in myself the need to avoid any contact with such representations, the ‘wish not to know’ (Bion...), detecting my ‘forgetfulness’ about my own several clinical psychiatric cases of severe mentally disturbed women, who killed their little children.

On the backstage of my psychoanalytic development I felt constantly puzzled by the enigma of life and death instinct. Especially dramatic appears to me also the enigma of male aggressiveness and destructiveness, so extremely acted in the wide range of human induced sufferings during wars and totalitarian repressions what led E. Hobsbawm in the “The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991” (1994), to define it as the most bloody, cruel and massively destructive century in human history - 187 millions victims.

A question raises: how is it possible that all those massive killers and destroyers have been born and raised by women - Madonnas? All of them were cute infants of their beautiful and ideal mothers. Where did Monstrous Ruiners come from?

There are constant widespread representations of a divine-like Maternal Identity, expressed by idealised Madonna images (as in Madonnas with child of the Italian Renaissance) and by idealised Female Characters, raised by poets and writers. But also there is an evident split, when we constantly see in parallel strong muscular heroes – soldiers, fighters without fear and remorse struggling with enemies. Their cruelty and unyielding willingness to kill and destroy appear so natural: the hero and the merciless killer are the same figure. How many so called National Heroes were in fact cynical executors for those whom they in an extreme paranoid–schizoid position considered just enemies, not human.

In my mind a possible point of view could be to look at humankind as a sort of unified androgynous entity, permeated by Eros/Life and Tanathos/Death instinct. Then there would occur a differentiation of gender roles, in part already stated in the Old Testament when God told to Adam: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground...” and to Eva: “...with pain you will give birth to children.” But there seems to have occurred a further differentiation between the male role who carries out the function of aggression and destruction, which is strongly forbidden as a taboo to women. It seems that to be able to give and promote life, females should attribute and delegate concrete wild destructivity to males, deposit, project it into them.

But in the bottomless abyss of the archaic unconscious, where there is not yet any role differentiation could be still perceivable, active and threatening murderous, infanticidal and cannibalistic impulses in both, what means also in women. It could be interesting to note that the plane which dropped from his belly on Hiroshima the nuclear bomb – called ‘Little Boy’ – was named after the plane Commander’s mother “Enola Gay”.) These are taboo zones and when we contact them, like when we consider the Medea myth, this evokes in us strong and complex emotional and intellectual reactions.

This issue reflects also the great power of the group law, the group super-ego in the individual psychic life and remind us of a necessity to take in account also the group context in each individual case.

My professional interest tried then to connect these questions also to thoughts about the relationships between Female Infertility, Maternal Depression and Female and Maternal Aggression and Destructivity.

### **Psychoanalytically oriented research and psychotherapy with pregnant women**

In my work with women, who had long infertility periods with recurrent miscarriages and stillbirths and with pregnant, often depressed, women, mothers with infants, children and adults I was many times confronted with a wide and variable range of maternal rejection, hostility, hate, active and passive aggression, deprivation of all kinds, violence, abuse, emotional withdrawal, absence and still destructive, poisoning, suffocating, possessive killing “love”, open neglect up to infanticidal thoughts and literally killing behavior.

Traditionally, the maternal function has been represented by text-book images as an only self-sacrificing love for children, care for and protection. When it turns upside down and the mother for her child becomes a threat or a source of damage, violent treatment or dangerous neglect, it demands to the environment/analyst a special patience, capacity to tolerate, to contain very intense, toxic, archaic affects and anxieties, raised by a forcible immersion in the darkest domain of feminine and maternal “Medean” destructivity.

In the simplified idealization of maternity and infancy there is in fact a superficial view, the result of a defensive reduction of the complexity of the process of becoming and being a woman and a mother. There is an avoidance of the contact with the archaic wild instinctive drives, which raise unbearable anxieties that may threaten the Self - integrity.

In a symbiotic relationship, where thinking is too much concrete, the idea of a separation is felt as comparable or equal to death. Because all what has been projected into and introjected from the other will get lost for ever, like being eradicated, as there have not been done enough symbolic “copies” to substitute the “originals” that go away.

Still, as the self and object boundaries could remain relatively undeveloped, at an unconscious level, like in communicating vessels, babies can greedily suck life out of their mothers and mothers out of their babies, one emptying the other.

So, at the peak of a fusional symbiotic sameness, also separation at birth could mean

death and could become a life-and-death struggle: either the mother or the baby, but not both, could survive.

My work with women who suffered infertility problems and with depressed pregnant women and mothers with infants during last 20 years make me think that the hypothesis on Medea fantasies in the psychodynamic of female depression could be very useful. While studying Maternal Depression I was struck by the power of aggressive destructivity in women and its connectedness with dreadful, murderous unconscious phantasies. Maternal Depression could be considered as undermining, destroying the foundations of generative female identity. I suppose that in all cases of maternal aggression and destructivity unconscious Medea fantasies could be recognized.

D. Stern (1995) also describes early identificatory processes of this kind on the basis of direct observation of interactions between depressive mothers and their babies. As children of depressive mothers have an extremely intense need of a close contact with their primary object, the only course that remains open to them is a massive identification, so that they ultimately align themselves with the mother's depression also in terms of facial expression, gesture and affective behaviour.

Unconscious aggressive and destructive impulses may interfere with the development of the Maternal identity before pregnancy, inhibiting fertility. Later, Maternal attachment could be prohibited or inhibited by hateful and aggressive (both passive and active) attitude toward the baby already during pregnancy. We have found serious difficulties or a complete inhibitions of the development of maternal identification and maternal attachment to the unborn child in women of a high risk group, who experienced recurrent miscarriages or/and stillbirths, long periods of infertility and not successful medical treatments and who suffered anxiety and depressive disorders, who had unprocessed trauma of losses and/or separations (T. Pushkarova, 2006).

### **Clinical vignettes**

I would like to briefly share two clinical examples of aggressive and destructive maternal attitudes of women, who in their childhood suffered the depression of their mothers. Treating their daughters by psychoanalytic psychotherapy or/and psychoanalysis I must deal with strong aggression and destructiveness.

#### ***Case M***

In an analytic psychotherapy with an angel looking 6 years old girl M. I was overwhelmed and puzzled by the compulsive repetition of her very early massive trauma. In her previous years her single alcoholic mother, who also had a neglectful experience with her depressed mother, neglected and deprived her of food and minimal security. At age of 8-9 months she and her twin brother, during one of their mother's orgias, had been so traumatically shackled in their pram to produce them

severe craniocerebral traumas, from which her twin brother died. Consciously she didn't either remember or know this. I've learnt this from her foster mother, but in her obsessive plays in the sessions she always became furiously aggressive and destructive, expressing this terrible experience of having a murderous mother by representing a wild, cruel, murderous horse, which destroyed, crashed everything we built together and killed every character in our play which represented goodness or kindness or a normal wish for well-being. Once she-wild horse cruelly and mercilessly threw one poor creature out from its bed and started to hit it strongly, though it had been previously injured, operated in the "hospital" (she injured him and then we together cured him). At that moment I lost my temper, spontaneously put a saddle on the horse back and told that this saddle would recognize the dangerous exacerbations of aggressive destructive impulses and stop them.

To my surprise M. stopped, looked very attentively and asked whether this will be painful for the horse or not. I answered that it would not be painful, but it would be as a signal and an impulse to stop. She relaxed and looked a bit sad, but got quite, put the horse with a saddle into its house and continued with another character. In fact she communicated her unbearable experiencing the absence of boundaries of dangerous and violent transgression (like the mentioned women in the Dionysian orgies), feeling that she was so unprotected from the outside and her inside dangers. My putting limits to that violent attacks calmed her down and gave her not only the feeling of being contained, but also protected by finding a symbolic representation of impulse control.

### *Case K*

In another case of a 4,5 year analysis with K, a girl from her 8 till 12 years, we worked through her narcissistic rage towards her mother, who was always busy, completely absorbed by her business, withdrawn and emotionally unreachable, although bright, beautiful, stylish and successful. The mother preferred her elder son and was so egoistically detached from her daughter that several times she even left alone from a party by her friends forgetting to take K home, who should then sleep in the friends' house. The same way she forgot her also at school and even at the analytic sessions.

At the beginning of her analysis K was full of envy, rage and offence. She did not want to be a girl nor to have menses and children. She dressed and behaved like a boy, was very sportive and fond of female football. K often had rough quarrels and conflicts with her mother and brother, provoked them to be aggressive with her, devaluated her mother and her business and wanted to run away from home.

There were also difficult periods with lots of bitter cries and complaints on her parents and her brother. Later we had a very destructive play where the main character was a Pig-President, a tiny plastic toy like from a Kinder Surprise. He had a harem with several wives and a lot of children, was super-rich and super-naughty. She enjoyed this role very much, projected into me her helpless, hopeless part and enjoyed her triumphal destructiveness over my part of our mutual toy world and over my attempts to have some alternative scenario. The Pig-President harem reflected her

feelings to her father, who at the third year of analysis married for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time and became father for the 4<sup>th</sup> time.

We overcame this hard period due to the stability and containing function of the trustful analytic relation. After having worked through her rage and offense we started a period of inventing games on each session where we should gain as much scores as possible. There were periods of competition and rivalry, she hardly could allow me to win until she felt saturated with her own capacity to be creative and active. This period was followed by a session in which she wanted me to learn a very tender and moving song in English “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”. It was a moment of reciprocity and real proximity and the expression of her attachment and recognition of our work. After that she made a great progress in her extra-school classes of dancing and singing. She became capable to admit her reactions on separations and we could work through her separation anxiety.

Once, after two sessions had been missed because of my absence, the whole session she sang two very sad songs – performing her grief. One of them was “Wrecking ball...” I understood that the attachment of K to her analyst and to the analytic space brought her to the pain of loss and separation and my recognition and mentalization of her feelings allowed us to go further.

In both described cases mothers came from abandoned, depressed unhappy single mothers, deprived of a partner’s/father’s care and support. Like in many others, in that cases there was a transgenerational transmission of female bitter grievance, hate and mistrust towards men and inclination to a repetition of the sado-masochistic relations, violence and destruction in relations with their partners and children.

According to the point of view of Marianne Leuzinger – Bohleber: “Pivotal to this (Medea) fantasy was the unconscious conviction that sexual passion carried the risk of existential dependence on their love partner and of eventual deception and abandonment by him. These women were unconsciously convinced that they would not be able to endure such an abandonment and would react to it with lethally destructive impulses constituting an existential danger to the self and the love object—as well as, in particular, to the products of the relationship with him: their children. For this reason it seemed to them psychically imperative to forgo any creative unfolding of their femininity and symbolically to ‘deaden’ themselves and their bodies.”

In the third clinical case I will present a dangerous fight for life between a mother and her infant. Similarly many female patients, facing sexual difficulties and reluctance to become pregnant, pointed out the same anxieties: “Either my body will be damaged by a child or my body will damage a child”.

### **Clinical case 3**

I refer to a more than a yearlong psychoanalytic psychotherapy with a prematurely born boy – Vanya and his parents – Tina and Vlad.

Vanya was born by Caesarean section on 28<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy for a life threat

of the mother due to very severe eclampsia and serious fetal placenta insufficiency. The pregnancy was wanted only by the mother, who begged her husband to “make a baby”. The mother, having already a 7 years old daughter with whom she had very close symbiotic relations, dreamt about a second daughter, for whom she had already a name and imagined herself being a happy mother of two nice, beloved and loving daughters named Sophia (Wisdom) and Salome (Peace, but also we remember biblical character, who demanded and received the head of John the Baptist).

First 5-6 weeks of pregnancy Tina felt very well and happy, actively worked as a medical nurse being absolutely convinced that she is pregnant with a girl. She was shockingly disappointed and could not believe the ultrasound investigation confirming that she was pregnant with a boy. Since that moment a struggle between the mother and her not born baby boy began. She developed symptoms of eclampsia and that dreadful fight in several weeks led Tina to an intensive care unit in the obstetrician clinic because of a serious life threat for both mother and baby. For one week she suffered severely both physically and psychically. She closely approached death because of a brain edema until the decision for a Caesarean section was taken and Vanya was born in asphyxia with 1000g weight. Both mother and baby were separated in different intensive care units. Vanya spent 2.5 months on artificial respirator, oxygen and artificial nutrition. He suffered a pneumonia with numerous medications, catheters on legs, on a subclavian vein etc. After 2 months, he was transferred to the infants’ department, but there he had an apnea with a clinical death, followed by reanimation and another 2.5 weeks of treatment in intensive care.

Recollecting Plato's “We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.” The life saving task of that therapy was to shed light into the most dark and threatening corners of mother’s unconscious, where monstrous hate towards men had its transgenerationally transmitted nest.

During this parent-infant psychoanalytic psychotherapy with weekly sessions there were a lot of difficulties for the mother to deal with her incapacity to develop maternal attachment to her son, to feel herself an appropriate mother for him. She suffered from persecutory guilt feelings and felt herself a bad mother. She was extremely sad, depressed, almost all the time crying, losing weight, having insomnia etc. She bitterly regretted her incapacity to carry on her pregnancy, to provide her baby breast feeding, but oppositely, she felt guilt to cause such a torment life start for her son and also she felt hate towards him for all her disappointments and sufferings and near death experience. They literally almost killed each other. The shadow of all this made impossible to get attuned and to create good mother-child bonds because of a strong mutual hate and rejection until psychotherapy started.

There were ongoing struggles between them, he rejected several nipples, regurgitated milk, hardly gained more weight and had periods of inconsolable crying.

The mother felt disappointed and angry, guilty and desperate, but our sessions were of great support for her developing capacity to understand herself and her son.

Gradually we discovered her unconscious fantasy about her milk being poisoned because of her hate feelings towards her son, who had brought her so many body

sufferings, which nearly “killed her”, how he had damaged her image of a good mother and brought constant feelings of being a bad, insufficient, incompetent mother. All this could have made breastfeeding impossible and hindered the development of her attachment to her son. She mistrusted him and he confirmed this by being difficult to be fed, to be carried for. Then we came to another significant discovery: the mother had received a transgenerational mandate of a “Medea complex” from both her grandmothers and her mother too: “Men deserve hate as they betray, abandon, use and torture women.”

Her mother’s father, her own father and her husband were alcoholics, who humiliated and tormented their wives with different forms of violence and betrayal. The grandfather from her father’s side was a Don Juan and abandoned her grandmother with three children. So, she inherited unconscious hateful and revengeful fantasies towards men that affected her pregnancy with Vanya.

Vanya's emotional demands became evident to his mother and she, feeling contained by the therapeutic process, was able to suffer her pain and be receptive to her son's pain. It started to become possible for the baby to express and the mother to understand the basic need for containment and their internalization of the capacity to transform experiences could progress.

I will finish with another quotation from Washington Irving: “There is in every true woman's heart, a spark of heavenly fire, which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity, but which kindles up and beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity.” Hopefully, this fire, which, lets say, represent a power of life instinct, provides us with an ability to stand and to cope with aggressivity and destructivity in psychoanalysis and life.

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