

“... *The Mediterranean, the middling mother of wine
and of olive-skinned races and of all the ideas we still
live by, we children of the northern mists...*”

John Updike, Seek My Face, p. 256

We put out the call “for texts embracing the extraordinary topic of Mediterranean mothers. Individual accounts will mingle with the universal... to flesh out that mystic figure haunting imaginations the length and breadth of Mare Nostrum: having a mother, being a mother, thinking of motherhood, disposing of mother, dreaming of mother... so many ways to approach the issue, no doubt many more than we can conjure up.” What we didn’t quite appreciate was that we’d opened a Pandora’s Box. More potential contributors than we’d counted upon volunteered their say. Yet many of these, when it came down to it, found themselves stymied. The subject was tempting but daunting, as I myself discovered when I faced the experience of trying to put down on paper ‘me own mum’ who rests in a Mallorcan churchyard grave 40 years after having migrated from the ‘northern mists’. I concluded, like many others of our erstwhile contributors, that I’d best save my account for an autobiography!

In the meantime, I have been driven to try to piece together some of the long history of Mediterranean mothers, an exercise that has stretched from thinking about motherhood to contemplating womanhood. It began by questioning Thomas Mann’s version of Joseph’s sale into bondage by his brothers. It seemed unaccountable that the scene when the brothers return to Canaan and recount Joseph’s purported death makes no mention of the boy’s mother, Rachel. In fact, Mann had adopted the Biblical account: “And Jacob rent his clothes and put sackcloth round his waist and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose to console him...” (Genesis 37:34. Cf. the masterful new translation by Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses. A Translation with Commentary*.

W.W. Norton & Co., New York, London 2004). Not a word concerning Rachel, about whom it will be remembered God had finally “opened her womb” and taken away her shame when she conceived and gave birth to a son, to Joseph (30:32).

I turned to the “Verse of Joseph” in the excellent new translation of the Qur’an by Tarif Khalidi (Penguin, London, 2008) to see if Rachel had more recognition: well, alas, she receives no mention whatsoever. One has to look further into the fundamental monotheistic texts to extract images of motherhood and womanhood. And here, of course, accounts of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Biblical and otherwise, can fill encyclopaedias. Without pretensions to being a specialist on the status and images of mothers or women in mythology, in ancient or monotheistic texts, I consider elsewhere, in this issue, a few of these figures, angels and demons. But keep in mind the double character of the mother, the sacred and the satanic.

The well-known phrase by Simone de Beauvoir “one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman” (*on ne naît pas femme: on le devient*) may be extended in many cultural contexts to “...when one becomes a mother.” The separation of the biological from the cultural is necessary. An example took place during my fieldwork in a small Tunisian town in the Sahel region: Lalla Hanna was an 80-year-old spinster. Hanna translates as ‘grandmother’ and Lalla is an honorific similar to ‘Lady’. She lived with her niece, herself a mother and grandmother several times over. Her brother, the niece’s father, was a highly respected *qadi*, a Muslim judge. He owned a sizeable number of olive trees which Lalla Hanna oversaw. She would go into the fields to supervise the upkeep and collection of olives and pay the workers. She would stand in for her brother as if she were a man. Without children, she was not considered a woman.

When she talked to me about her life, she said that she had been married as a young maiden. After some years of barrenness, she demanded that her husband divorce her and remarry because she was clearly unable to conceive and would not agree to becoming a second wife. He responded that he loved her and that he was prepared to live with her without children. She insisted, but only received his agreement when she said to him “and what will we do when we grow old? Sit and stare at the walls?” That was the winning argument. He divorced her and took another wife with whom he had a dozen children. So she lived like a man, she told me, unveiled, working in

the olive groves. Luckily she was taken into the family of her niece and could enjoy the liveliness and love of children who were not hers.

It is not uncommon in the Maghreb, and in Corsica I'm told, that a married woman unable to bear children receives a child at birth from a brother or sister to bring up as her own. Recently, a young woman journalist who I met in Fez passed on greetings from her 'mother-in-law' Zineb who she said had been my assistant when I did research in Morocco 45 years ago. I remembered Zineb all right, but she had been childless. It turned out that her sister had given Zinab one of her children, a baby boy, and that she had brought him up. Such children know their biological parents, but their 'real' home and mother is where they have grown up.

Here's another example from my experience in Morocco. Ijja, a Berber woman from the Souss, who worked as a maid for our family in Rabat, had been abandoned by her husband when, shortly after their marriage, he went off to work in France and never returned. Ijja in time became the second wife of someone, but bore no children. She was, however, given her brother's daughter to bring up as her own. She also, only half jokingly, 'took possession' of our own daughter, constantly reminding us that "Tamar is my daughter, not yours, she belongs to me."

The Tunisian sociologist Abdelwahab Bouhdiba describes Arab-Muslim society as a veritable Kingdom of Mothers: everything begins and ends with the mother. The cult of motherhood is a master key for understanding personality. It is the "psychological umbilical cord", the "authentic roots" of the individual. Sterility is a "curse". (cf. *Islam et sexualité*). The father respects the "mother of my children" (*umm awladi*) and even his mother-in-law, his *hama*, a "protector", as the sense of the term indicates. Bouhdiba presents a patriarchal model in which the father is "castrator" in a society which emasculates its men and in which the only refuge comes from mothers. They and their children combine their efforts to try to block and compensate for the abusiveness of patriarchy, to undermine male domination. For mothers their children are antennas to the world of men, the means of access to the world outside. "Daily life", he writes, "weaves a thousand and one ties of complicity between a mother and her children."

“Where’s my mother? Give me back my mother; I accept no replacement for her...I need the love of my mother,” cries the Iraqi poet Zahawi quoted by J. Berque in *Les arabes d’hier à demain*. The mother is bridge, mediator, shield vis-à-vis the father. She will choose her son’s bride and manage relations with in-laws. Moreover, in man’s unconscious mind she reigns as queen: the Kingdom of Mothers is built on the foundations of a castrated patriarchal society. Not surprisingly, relations with one’s mother are preferred to those with the father. The shock for a male child, at least in Salé, Morocco, in earlier generations, came when he was ‘exiled’ from the society of women into that of men, the Quranic school where he was punished for his feminine speech patterns, his mother’s tongue, until he learned to speak like a ‘man’.

In Bouhdiba’s account, marriage for women is no more than a passage from one kind of submission to another, from fear of the father to fear of the husband. The form changes, but the facts of authoritarianism by males remain. True, pregnancy offers some compensation. A sort of female autonomy exists within the patriarchal domain, for example in a mother’s right to breast-feed her own children and have custody of them until a certain age according to Islamic law. Yet for men marriage is a prolongation, a replacement of the relation with mother. In the long run, they will be condemned to live in the world of men. The excessive idealisation of the mother gives way to the disappointments and instabilities of marriage, and of men’s incapacity to detach themselves from their mothers-wives. Bouhdiba goes further, contending that Arabs are born Don Juans who pursue marriage and divorce in a perpetual search for the ideal model of their mother, for a mother-substitute.

At the same time, this idealisation of the mother figure stops men from sprouting their own wings and becoming free of the shadows of their mothers: “in the common interest of man and his mother, the veil of the mother must be torn away and maternity must be demystified.” This is Bouhdiba’s argument and position, but he also points out that “whether ‘fanatical’ or not, ‘savage’ and ‘intolerant’, or not, the Islamic faith kept in abeyance any assimilationist awakening.” The religious convictions of mothers contributed to the struggles for independence. At the same time, recourse to mothers as a refuge and shelter has been a rampart against change.

These interpretations may be specific to characteristics of motherhood in Arab regions of the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, the separation of mother and child, the cutting of the umbilical cord, is never complete anywhere. An 'exile' takes place, and with it 'nostalgia' wherever and whenever it happens. In the texts we've assembled the mother is ubiquitous, the absolute certitude of her love and her judgement are expected, demanded. In *Le livre de ma mère*, Albert Cohen describes the dignity of his mother in her devotion. She is his idealised icon of the mother-saint: tender, gentle, wise, innocent, defenceless, faultless, humble, guilty, submissive, a prisoner and a victim. And, if one can generalise further, to mourn one's mother is also to mourn one's lost childhood, to contemplate and await one's own death while she lives on in memories and dreams. That is the bright side. There is a dark side, as well, that drives some of the real or imagined idealisations of childhood into the shadows. Without maternity there can be no fraternity nor, for that matter, fratricide.

James Joyce comes down on the side of light in darkness: "Whatever else is unsure in this stinking dunghill of a world, a mother's love is not."

