

SEXUALITY, RELIGION, AND SPIRITUALITY

A Study of the Role of Religion
in the
Oppression of Women

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of the relations between sexuality, religion and spirituality. The use of these terms is not conventional, and my introductory chapter is to a large extent concerned with elucidating what I mean by each of them. This unconventionality is itself crucial to the thesis: I am calling into question some of the basic assumptions behind traditional anthropological questions. I am using Burridge's definition of religion from his New Heaven New Earth:

The redemptive process indicated by the activities, moral rules, and assumptions about power which, pertinent to the moral order and taken on faith, not only enable a people to perceive the truth of things, but guarantee that they are indeed perceiving the truth of things (1969:6-7).

I examine how religion, insofar as its assumptions about the truth of things are to be taken on faith, is at odds with spirituality, which is the essential quality of a life which is lived to experience the truth for oneself.

Religion, which upholds the moral order of society, is static; spirituality is dynamic — it implies change and growth.

Sexuality is defined as "... the biological differences

between female and male, and the real or assumed psychological differences dependent on these". It is shown that the only such difference is the fact that women are able to bear children, and men are not. There are no innate psychological differences between the sexes. However, people are differently socialized on the basis of the one biological difference mentioned above, so that the social personalities of women and men may, on the average, be different. My understanding of the causes of this difference in socialization rests on Simone de Beauvoir's approach to the problem in The Second Sex.

Cultural assumptions about what it means to be female or male are discussed as being oppressive to spirituality. Insofar as the religion of a culture is its rationale, religion is focused on here as the arena where the sexual division of society takes place. Cultural definitions of sexuality are seen as the major cultural obstacle to spiritual growth.

The particular religions examined are 1) those of the Australian Aborigines and the BaMbuti Pygmies; 2) that of Hindu civilization as manifested in the Kama Sutra (I explain why I feel it is legitimate to consider the Kama Sutra a religious work); and 3) Buddhism.

I discuss how anthropologists avoid questioning the morality of sexual oppression, and why they are concerned

only with examining its effects upon the members of society.

My basic conclusion is that all definitions of sexuality which attribute more to females and males than the fact that the former can bear children while the latter cannot are sexist: they are akin to religion and inimical to spirituality.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis, or at least the original thoughts and reading behind it, started out with myself. This may sound obvious; but I feel it is something which should be said. The questions I am concerned with are not just something out there in the objective world. They are not academic problems which can be approached in a manner free of personal bias. This too may sound obvious — the influence of the observer on the situation being examined is itself a subject of concern in the social and other sciences. But even for me to speak of "bias" puts an unnecessarily negative value on the personal, whereas to recognize that opinions are deeply personal should be enough: they are expressions of real feelings. This, I feel, is often not

obvious, or again, too obvious to be recognized. It often carries over into looking at people as anything but real persons. The concern here is something which affects all of us, and each of us in a very personal way.

I am more than intellectually interested in religion, sexuality, and spirituality. I am in part a reflection of religion and sexuality; sexuality and spirituality are in part reflections of me. To give meaning to that statement, I must first explain what I mean by each of those three words, which make up the title of this thesis.

In approaching religion, I am using as a guide Burridge's definition of religion from his New Heaven New Earth (1969):

The redemptive process indicated by the activities, moral rules, and assumptions about power which, pertinent to the moral order and taken on faith, not only enable a people to perceive the truth of things, but guarantee that they are indeed perceiving the truth of things (1969:6-7).

To summarize by way of selection from the relevant textual material:

... there is no human activity which cannot assume religious significance (1969:4).

[All religions] are concerned with the discovery, identification, moral relevance and ordering of different kinds of power... (1969:5): [e.g., "thunder", "untrammelled desire", "apparitions",

"persuasive words".]

Religions, let us say, are concerned with the systematic ordering of different kinds of power, particularly those seen as significantly beneficial or dangerous. This entails a specific framework of rules (1969:5).

As experience widens and deepens, some of the rules and assumptions will be qualified, and others abandoned altogether.... These assumptions are community truths, truths which command a consensus (1969:5).

Society, moreover, prescribes the attitudes and activities by which its members can pay back or redeem the debt incurred in being nurtured, made morally aware, and enabled to exert and realize their potential.... But this, the payment of the debt in full, can only be realized when a human being becomes in himself completely unobliged, without any obligation whatsoever — a freemover in heaven, enjoying nirvana, or joined with the ancestors (1969:6).

What I value most in this approach to religion is that it takes into account both individual and collective experience.

Sexuality can be very confusing; paradoxically perhaps, because sex differences are so rigidly defined. By sexuality I mean the biological differences between female and male and the real or assumed psychological differences dependent on these. I am not using the word in the sense of sexual sensuality. In Chapter 2 I show why I feel the only biological difference between the sexes is that women alone are able to bear children. In fact, it is on the basis of the kind of genitals which a newborn child has — indicating

whether or not that child will be able to bear children as an adult — that it is originally defined as female or male. This may seem to be a truism, and thus not to warrant explanation. But truisms, as the suffix on the word implies, are not truths: they involve assumptions, just as does religion, which underlie the moral order of society. As social beings, we hardly ever recognize that these assumptions are not "the truth of things". The assumptions about what it means to be female or male are, for the most part, only cultural facts; and as such they are highly oppressive to individual people.

I say that because, as I continue to discuss in Chapter 2, I feel there are also no innate (biologically-based) psychological differences between the sexes. Rather, any such differences as may exist — and this would still be on the average — are the product of cultural conditioning. Individuals are stereotyped according to the cultural personality patterns desired of females and males, so that they will conform to the way in which social organization deals with the one biological difference.

The fact that female and male psychological characteristics differ from culture to culture shows that cultural patterns do not merely develop innate psychological differences between the sexes. These patterns are oppressive not only in denying each sex group the exploration of possibilities

of the other group, but furthermore, in treating individuals as members of groups to which they are, in a very real way, culturally assigned. It is not considered, for example, that some women may not want to have children, and/or exhibit the personalities required of them in a role as mother; nor that some men may not want to be aggressive, or even be physically capable of the aggression desired by society of the average male.

Cultural definitions of sexuality — of sex differences and related personality differences — are sex roles. They are akin to dogma. Sexuality is, to my mind, better called "sexism" (Chapter 9). I see sexism as part of religion, in the sense of Burrige's definition. It involves ordering a kind of power, woman's childbearing capacity, in a way which is morally relevant to society, which affects social action. It prescribes how the members of society can pay back the debt incurred in being socialized according to sex roles: that is, for example, a woman must fulfill that role by being a mother. This is a double-bind: religion can be insidious.

Inasmuch as I am a product of my culture, I am a reflection of religion and sexuality. Yet insofar as I can transcend sexuality as religion, my sexuality is a reflection of myself. It is not felt as male or female for me, but only as it happens to coincide with those cultural values. It is an expression of an individual, not a manifestation of

role-playing.

The process of transcending one's culture is a spiritual one. I define spirituality as the essential quality of a life which is lived primarily as a process of learning, free from the arbitrariness of cultural values. Spirituality is something conscious: it involves an awareness not just that cultural values are arbitrary, but that it is one's moral obligation to act accordingly. It is thus intentional. That does not mean it has anything to do with what we often call holiness, which is generally, in my opinion, a pretense to being spiritual.

Religion as social organization generally cannot tolerate spirituality. It is at odds with individuals wanting to find the truth for themselves. It only accepts individual experience if that experience can be used as evidence that the religion is indeed guaranteeing perception of the truth of things. I do not mean to say that religion and spirituality must be in conflict, though I am convinced they almost always are. For there to be a synthesis between the two, religion would allow for individual spiritual growth, and would control this only if one person's path impinged upon the freedom of others. That is, the redemptive process for an individual would involve her or his free self-discovery.

If I do not accept my culture's idea of proper masculine behavior and attitude, it is more than likely that I will be

confronted with negative reactions on the part of other people. This leads to what I see as the most fundamental moral issue for any person: to be oneself, or what others want of one. The first is a positive choice: it allows for growth and enables one to make her (his) own decisions. The second is negative in that it is passive or really lacking the element of choice; it is static and lifeless — control leaves no possibility for mistakes, discovery and learning. (This is close to Simone de Beauvoir's view of existentialist ethics, which I discuss in Chapter 3.) Religion, inasmuch as it denies spiritual striving, is static dogma: accepting it means accepting an authority outside the realm of one's direct experience. Spirituality, on the other hand, entails accepting change: the only thing that doesn't change is the reality of change, of life as personal experience.

Perhaps it seems I am overlooking mystical experiences which are not a matter of personal choice. Are they not spiritual, nonetheless? I would say that this depends upon one's definition of spirituality. According to the one I have presented, a particular mystical experience may or may not be spiritual. First of all, I take "mystical" to imply a transcendence of culture, as in the following description of shamanism and spirit possession from I.M.Lewis' Ecstatic Religion:

In both cases ... the initial experience

withdraws the victim from the secure world of society, and exposes him directly to those forces which, though they may be held to uphold the social order, also ultimately threaten it (1971:188).

The social order is a structure created out of chaos, and it is into this chaos that one is led through a mystical experience. If such an experience were spiritual, it would involve understanding the arbitrariness of one's culture, and acting in a way which transcends it. But, in referring to the spirits of shamans, Lewis says:

On the one hand, they chastise those who infringe their neighbours' rights; and on the other, they inspire shamans to act as trouble-shooters and law-givers in community relations....If they have not been invented by men in order to tame and canalize anti-social aspirations and impulses, to a significant extent they act as though they have been (1971:163).

This strikes me as being closer to religion than spirituality; or at least it is ambiguous: there is the potential here for a wielding of power which infringes on the spiritual striving of others. I can only say that each shaman would have to be judged on his or her own merits.

However, it should be pointed out that the mystical experience of the likes of shamans are to a great extent guided by culture. Even if the experience transcends culture, it is a religious initiation into a social role, and this would affect the interpretation of the experience along the lines of cultural morality.

But I still have not touched on the issue of choice.

Referring to Christian mysticism, Lewis writes:

... the experience, which the would-be mystic claims, is all the more convincing if it can be shown to be contrary to his own wishes, and cannot then be dismissed simply as a direct wish-fulfillment (1971:23).

There are, in my opinion, two ways to look at this. First of all, such an experience may be genuinely spiritual: it may represent the struggle towards freedom from the cultural definition of oneself. Insofar as one has taken this definition to be true, the struggle may be a painful one, and the strength of one's new consciousness may be felt as an external force. Secondly, on the contrary, the struggle may be an attempt to conform to a social role:

The initial experience of possession, particularly, is often a disturbing, even traumatic experience, and not uncommonly a response to personal affliction and adversity. Up to a point, this is even the case in those societies where the position of shaman-priest has become firmly instituted and passes more or less automatically to the appropriate hier by title rather than by personal attainmentWhere the successor shows reluctance in assuming his onerous duties, the spirits remind him forcefully of his obligations by badgering him with trials and tribulations until he acknowledges defeat and accepts their insistent prodding. We find examples of this spiritual blackmail in all those societies where, as among the Tungus, the position of shaman is regarded as an inherited office (1971:66).

I would call spiritual blackmail "religious" blackmail.

The relations between culture and mystical experience are thus complex. A mystical experience may or may not be spiritual. And a spiritual experience need not be mystical: it need not involve a complete transcendence of the social order in a moment. Spirituality, rather, involves a process of attempting to become free of arbitrary cultural values.

There is a great paradox central to the human condition which I deal with in Chapter 2 and refer to in subsequent chapters: what distinguishes humans from animals is culture. The experience of culture is a precondition for its transcendence: the arbitrariness of such distinctions as female vs. male must be known before one can go beyond it. Culture is thus a necessary condition for spiritual growth. However, not only is it not a sufficient condition; if its basic assumptions remain one's ultimate truths, then it makes such growth impossible. If, for example, a man and woman relate to each other merely as manifestations of social roles, then the roles are likely to be of the order of self-fulfilling prophecies about the nature of men and women. Even if one of the two has transcended the role and does not, in turn, treat the other as a manifestation of one, she or he may be seen by the other as abnormal, as the exception which proves the rule. This is of course not always the case: a person may have doubts as to the validity of sex roles and need only the encounter with another who has transcended them in order to confirm this experientially.

Simone de Beauvoir, in The Second Sex, deals with the duality in human consciousness which is behind such cultural distinctions. She is particularly concerned with the dichotomy of Self vs. Other: in human society, woman has come to be the Other. In Chapter 3, I discuss this concept of de Beauvoir's, which is crucial to my own approach throughout the thesis; and I examine cultural myths which seem to me to be manifestations of this dichotomy. These myths — those of the Australian Aborigines and the BaMbuti Pygmies — are in a sense charters for the existing sexual divisions in the respective societies.

In Chapter 4 I examine the religion and other aspects of social organization of the Australian Aborigines. A couple of years ago, before conceptualizing this thesis, I had read W.L. Warner's A Black Civilization (1958). He says of the Murngin people of Australia:

The first life crisis occurs when the Murngin soul, through the father's mystic experience, leaves the totemic well and enters the womb of the mother. By circumcision around the age of six to eight years the individual passes from the social status of a woman to that of a man. When at about the age of eighteen he achieves parenthood and is shown his totems for the first time he goes to another, higher status; and to a still higher when, at about thirty-five, he sees the high totems. At death he passes through a very elaborate mortuary rite, returns to his totemic well, and the circle is complete. The personality before birth is purely spiritual; it becomes almost completely profane or

unspiritual in the earlier period of its life when it is classed socially with the females, gradually becomes more and more ritualized and sacred as the individual grows older and approaches death, and at death once more becomes completely spiritual or sacred. This is the life of all Murngin men. A woman, on the other hand passes out of the sacred existence of the unborn to the profane existence of the born and living, and back again to the sacred existence of the dead; but little sacred progress is made during her lifetime (1958:5-6).

I wondered why women made little spiritual progress during their lives, why the Murngin saw it that way, but for some time I had no sense of a direction which would lead me to any understanding here. I finally realized that these religious beliefs about spirituality reflect the experience of the males, and began to think that social life in most if not all societies is largely an expression of a male view of life.

Murngin religious beliefs about spirituality allow for growth in a man's experience, but do not do the same for women. They justify the situation and perpetuate the status quo. The freedom to develop spiritually for men is complemented by a lack of that freedom for women. It implies that men do not accept women as real people. This unwillingness to accept the experience of women and let it touch one's own, to avoid it or what it has come to mean for men, indicates an element of fear in that same religious expression which at first glance seems to be one of affirmation of life as

change. It is static dogma, a denial of woman, and of the woman in man.

This criticism is not enough: insofar as any freedom rests on slavery it is a sham¹ — the men aren't free. But my ultimate concern is that half the potential people in Murngin or other societies are denied experience and therefore denied life. It may be argued that this social expression of religion does not prevent women from ultimately striving to realize themselves spiritually, that they have hopes and desires regardless of what men say and do. This is certainly so, and it is why the situation is one of slavery. If the realization of one's hopes and desires is denied, these feelings themselves become reactions in part to something else, rather than expressions of oneself. Real moral choice, choice which can be acted upon freely, is not possible. The social morality of the redemptive process is in conflict with self realization and freedom from obligations, with the attainment of that moral state which is actually a transcendence of morality.

I do not know if this pattern is universal in human society. I suspect that it always exists at least to some degree. I see it among the BaMbuti Pygmies, who have been pointed to by Colin Turnbull (The Forest People, 1962) as being close to a social state in which there is no oppression on the basis of sex.

In Chapter 5 I look at the Kama Sutra, a literary work

from a society very different from that of the Australian Aborigines, whose religious tradition is an oral one. Aboriginal society is a nomadic one based on hunting and gathering. Hindu society, the setting for the Kama Sutra, was at the time the work was written a mercantile society and a considerably urbanized one.

While scholars may not think the Kama Sutra to be a religious book, I feel justified in treating it as one. First of all, it reflects the ethos of Hindu society, and thus conforms to Burridge's definition of religion. Secondly, it is popularly referred to as a book which, although concerned with sex, is ultimately spiritual in intent: I would say "religious" in intent, as the popular meaning of the word "spiritual" seems to me to confuse it with "religious" — as I have said, I mean by "spirituality" something very different from religion. Thirdly, Vatsyayana, the author of the Kama Sutra, himself gives an ultimately religious justification for his book; and he frequently refers to more standard religious works such as the Laws of Manu.

I discuss how the Kama Sutra reflects and encourages among men a pattern of social life which is oppressive to the spiritual development of women, as do the myths and rituals of the Australian Aborigines.

Chapter 6 is primarily a discussion of Buddhism. I have

chosen to look at this religion because, while on the one hand it appears to be positively concerned with spirituality as I define it, on the other it involves sexist attitudes which make its own spiritual goals more difficult for women to attain than for men.

In Chapter 7 I make explicit my criticism of anthropology which is at least implicit in much of the preceding material. My main point here is that anthropologists do not criticize the cultures they study on moral grounds because this would entail looking at their own in a similar manner, a self-examination which would likely be difficult and painful. I am in a sense encouraging a "spiritual anthropology" which transcends culture. Such an anthropology would not accept sexism as axiomatic to the human condition.

I conclude Chapter 7 (and with it the thesis) with a reiteration and further explication of what is for me the underlying assumption of this thesis: there are no innate differences between females and males other than the fact that only the former can bear children, and to treat people as if there are differences other than that one fact is to oppress their spiritual development.

The struggle with the social illusion that male and female are separate and mutually exclusive is a spiritual one. It is an experience of discovering a self which is not necessarily either one or the other. As long as such an

illusion is taken for reality, then, if personal experience does not conform to it, it becomes always harder to accept oneself, and to see oneself as the source of possibilities in life.

But I write that as a man. The religion of my society sees men and women differently. (I mean religion in the sense of Burridge's definition. I am not referring to any church or similar institution.) The society treats men and women differently in very concrete ways. I may choose not to conform to a role imposed from outside myself, and I may encounter hostility or other negative reactions from people who fear this deviation from an established order. Because the possibilities allowed me as a man are greater than those allowed a woman in the society in which I am living, the possibilities I see for myself are more likely to be realized than they would if I were a woman. I may be seen as crazy for giving up what is seen by many as an advantage. I think, though, that a woman rejecting her role is more likely to be seen as an actual threat to the established order, and to be reacted to in a way that even further decreases the likelihood that she can be who she wants. I can pretend to conform, to my advantage: my inner possibilities can then still make the most of those allowed me from outside. If a woman so pretends, however, she gets nowhere; she is back where she started, because she continues

to be treated as women are commonly treated — what is allowed her is much more limited.

In a sense, then, can I keep my integrity and still live in society as is expected of me in a male social role? No. Again, this freedom is a sham. There is nothing spiritual about any realization I may have if it is not one which affects my actions.

This thesis is a discussion of the conflict between religion and spirituality, and male and female. This is not to say that females are more spiritual than males. (Actually, men have often seen it as just the opposite, most likely in conjunction with mistaking religion for spirituality.) Rather, religion has generally been male-dominated, and the social issue of female liberation is an individual, spiritual issue for everyone, in that it is one of human freedom.

This paper, then, is an attempt to see why religion has been largely a male expression, and to look at how it reflects and perpetuates the oppression of women, which I see as a denial of free spiritual expression.

FOOTNOTES

¹ I anticipate that my use of the word "slavery" may seem unjustified to the reader. I think it is not: it has been used in many ways to describe the position of women. J.S. Mill, in The Subjection of Women, says, "Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. ...They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds" (1869/1970: 141). Mill says the subjection of women is the most lasting form of slavery, as it would require that half of humanity give up its power (1869/1970:136). Simone de Beauvoir, in The Second Sex, speaks of women as enslaved to the demands of the species. She also points out that Hegel's ideas about the master-slave relationship apply better to the man-woman relationship (1961: 59).

CHAPTER 2

THE ISSUE OF
BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

I said in the introductory chapter that all of the biological factors involved in a discussion of the position of women are related to the fact that it is women who bear children. I will try to develop two basic points in this chapter: first, that this biological difference is not a valid basis for making a priori judgments about the physical abilities of individual women and men (In the next chapter I will try to show why the same may apply to empirical judgments as well.); and second, that this biological fact, important as it may be, does not mean that there are any innate psychological differences between females and males (assuming that such differences might have a bearing on spiritual or other proclivities). It is true of course that not all women have children, so perhaps to be more accurate, the one fact should be seen as that of different

external and internal organs enabling one sex only, or almost all of its members, to bear children. There are some such as Freud who do actually believe that these differences imply innate psychological ones — Freud even goes so far as to say that a woman is contradicting her true, biologically-based nature if she does not want to have children.¹

Genital sexual characteristics, on the basis of which society initially considers people to be female or male, indicate little, if anything, about the other physical sexual characteristics of an individual, be these such so-called "secondary sexual characteristics" as amount and distribution of body hair, or such matters as height and weight. Taking averages of any measured physical traits of men or women in a given population, at least half of each sex would be either above or below average on any given trait. But furthermore, there would be a high degree of overlapping of the females and males when measured for height, heaviness of bone structure, etc.. We are then back at the difference on which basis people are said to be either female or male at birth: the kind of reproductive organs. Added to this is the complication that what are, for example, some of the physical characteristics of males in one ethnic group may correspond more closely to those of the females than of the males in another (Mead, 1968: 132 - 3).

Let us consider then the question of psychologically significant biochemical differences between the sexes. I know next to nothing about body chemistry, and to do enough research on it to make it worthwhile would have been beyond the scope of this paper. But I venture the following points regarding the idea that there may be sex-linked biochemical affects on moods, attitudes, intellect, emotions or any capacity for learning, spiritual or otherwise. First, the problem of averages and overlapping between the sexes would still apply. Second, we cannot assume that a person's biochemical makeup is unaffected by the human environment (as, for instance, is the case with ulcers); and that this environment may involve different psychological stresses on females and males. In Male and Female, Margaret Mead says:

Is this apparent range to be set down to differences in endocrine balance, set against our recognition that each sex depends for full functioning upon both male and female hormones and the interaction between these hormones and other endocrines? Has every individual a bisexual potential ~~that~~ may be physiologically evoked by hormone deficit or surplus, which may be psychologically evoked by abnormalities in the process of individual maturation, which may be sociologically invoked by rearing boys with women only, or segregating boys away from women entirely, or by prescribing and encouraging various forms of social inversion? ... At first blush, it seems exceedingly likely that we have to advance some such hypothesis. ... Yet the existing data makes us pause. The most careful research has failed to tie up endocrine balance with actual homosexual behaviour (1968: 130 - 1).

Finally, there are great differences between cultures as to the desired personalities of females and males (See for examples chapter 4 in Mead's Male and Female.), patterns which begin to be learned by a person virtually from the time of birth.

I do not mean that there are no relations between the biological and psychological makeup of individuals. The issue is that sex roles are assigned on the basis of the genital characteristic only. What the culture defines as normal, biologically or psychologically, for a male or female is thus likely to be in some degree of conflict with the manner and direction of experiencing life which comes naturally to and from a unique individual, female or male. " So the child, experiencing itself, is forced to reject such parts of its particular biological inheritance as conflict sharply with the sex stereotype of its culture" (Mead, 1968: 137). In rejecting part of the whole a person cannot grow in a natural way, insofar as² their experiencing will not be completely affirmative. The path will always be in part a reaction to the social stereotype of her- or himself.

Granted, such is the nature of social life, of the obligations involved in the redemptive process. If we were never socialized, however arbitrarily, would we ever develop a consciousness that enabled us to have the spiritual experience of transcending that social reality?

Awareness that things need not be as they are, or that they are not what they seem, is in the nature of our consciousness, one of duality. Anything implies its opposite or complement, life cannot be conceived of without death. It is on the basis of this consciousness that we commonly distinguish ourselves from animals, but that there are no animals who are not gifted with this possible awareness, no animals who are in this sense not animals, we really cannot say for sure. The point remains, though, that such is the condition of our being. We can be aware that any condition, such as a cultural definition of right and wrong action in a certain situation, may be arbitrary only after living according to this condition. It is only then possible to experience consciously that the separateness and mutual exclusiveness of right and wrong or good and evil is illusory. The paradox then is that the recovery of the whole, the spiritual rebirth, is only possible after the integrity of the whole has first been shattered. This process may be made explicit by religion itself in initiation ceremonies³ — but this does not mean that it is grasped fully by the consciousness of each participant.

(i) The Sexual Division of Labour

How is the sexual division of labour related to the fact that women bear children and men do not? And how is this social division itself often taken to imply innate psychological or temperamental differences between the sexes, as well as physical ones other than the basic one mentioned? (The second question is primarily a matter for the next chapter.)

It seems from my experience that most people in our society who think about the matter, including students of anthropology, feel it is natural that men are hunters, and women are not, in a society which depends upon hunting. Women are gatherers of foodstuffs which do not run very fast. What is meant by "natural" is that men have the physical capacity to be better hunters: they can run faster, are more agile, stronger, etc.. Ashley Montagu seems to take this view in The Human Revolution (1965: 102 - 3). He suggests that there was a selective process for the evolution of men who could hunt more efficiently. That would be hard to refute, nor does there seem to be any reason to make the attempt. But how relevant is it? No doubt there has also been a similar selective process at work for women who could successfully bear children, and I suggest that such women would have to be sufficiently healthy to a point which nullifies any argument that

men are better hunters by virtue of physique.

Granted, there are separate events for men and women in competitive athletics, and the fastest man is likely to be faster than the fastest woman in the same event. But we are back again at the same issue of averages and overlapping, and how misleading the non-existent normal can be. Is there not likely to be a percentage of women in a hunting society who are more agile, and so in the end faster, than men who may well have longer legs? This agility, though, would not be encouraged and developed, because of the division of labour. This is only one of several such possibilities. Or what about Murdock's information that women are the burdenbearers in seventy per cent of the cases where this labour is involved (1937: 551)? Burdenbearing would require both strength and endurance.

But Montagu goes so far as to suggest that because they were bigger and stronger, and therefore better hunters, men inspired in women a natural awe. This implies that women did not see their own work in a very positive light. I imagine that to be a man's rather than a woman's view (though such a view could conceivably influence a woman's view of herself). Phyllis Kaberry says of the Lunga of Western Australia:

In actual quantity, the woman probably provides more over a fixed period than

the man, since hunting is not always successful. She always manages to bring home something, and hence the family is dependent on her efforts to a greater degree than on those of the husband (1939: 25).

But it is still commonly accepted in our society that "a woman's place is in the home", that breadwinning happens away from the home, and that men are the breadwinners because it has always been so due to innate sexual differences. The above quotation is an example of how it has not always been so. Why, then, do men see it this way? Do women see the situation at all as men see it?

Simone de Beauvoir suggests an answer to this question which I will look at in the next chapter, as it is at the root of myths about sex differences and their implications for the experience of life. She says that as hunting and the adventures involved in the pursuit and kill are potentially dangerous activities:

The worst curse that was laid upon woman was that she should be excluded from these warlike forays. For it is not in giving life but in risking it that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills (1961: 58).

And it is the fact that women are the sex which brings forth which is why they are not the hunters in societies dependent upon this activity. Judith Brown gets to the core of this condition in "A Note on the Division of

Labour by Sex:

Anthropologists have long noted the narrow range of subsistence activities in which women make a substantial contribution: gathering, hoe agriculture, and trade. Although men do gather, carry on hoe cultivation and trade, no society depends on its women for the herding of large animals, the hunting of large game, deep-sea fishing, or plow agriculture. That women can be proficient at these activities (Jenness (1923) reports women seal hunters among the Copper Eskimo⁴; Forde (1934) reports that women herd reindeer for parts of the year among the Tungus⁵) is evidence that the division of labour by sex is not based entirely on immutable physiological facts of greater male strength and endurance. However, it is easy to see that all these activities are incompatible with simultaneous childwatching. They require rapt concentration, cannot be interrupted and resumed, are potentially dangerous, and require that the participant range far from home (1970:1075-6).

FOOTNOTES

¹ "Freud finds it typical that 'the constitution will not adapt itself to its function without a struggle.' And so it is that while the regenerate female seeks fulfillment in a life devoted to reproduction, others persist in the error of aspiring to an existence beyond the biological level of confinement to maternity and reproduction — falling into the error Freud calls 'the masculinity complex.' This is how one is to account for the many deviant women, both those who renounce sexuality or divert it to members of their own sex, as well as those who pursue 'masculine aims.' The latter group do not seek the penis openly and honestly in maternity, but instead desire to enter universities, pursue an autonomous or independent course in life, take up with feminism, or grow restless and require treatment as 'neurotic.' Freud's method was to castigate such 'immature' women as 'regressive' or incomplete persons, clinical cases of arrested development" (Kate Millett, 1970:186). Millett's references are to Sigmund Freud, Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex, trans. A.A. Brill (New York: Dutton, 1962).

² I have often chosen to use the plural form of a pronoun or pronominal adjective in order to avoid, for example, such sexist words as "he" when I am referring to people in general.

³ For a discussion of this possibility in ritual, see Victor Turner's The Forest of Symbols (1967:94-111).

⁴ D. Jenness, The Copper Eskimo: Report of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, 1913-18, 12 (Ottawa:Acland, 1923).

⁵ C. Daryll Forde, Habitat, Economy and Society (1934; rpt. New York: Dutton, 1963).

CHAPTER 3

SEXUALITY AND MYTH

I am using the word "myth" here in a flexible way. My concern is with clarifying what are probably universal attitudes toward life and toward women which may or may not find explicit expression in a traditional myth of a culture, but are nevertheless at work deep in the individual psyche, and have very basic effects on social life. This involves looking at the minds of both women and men. Although I have discussed why I don't believe in any innate psychological differences between female and male people, I do not feel this implies there are no common psychological reactions in females and males to the fact that they do or do not bear children, and to the nature of social life as it has been conditioned by this fact. In the course of this discussion, I will be further developing

some of the points which seem perhaps to have been given somewhat cursory treatment in the preceding chapter. I begin here with some of the basic ideas presented by Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex, and with my interpretation of, and reaction to them.

(i) The Basis of Sexual Myth-making: The Female as the Other

There are two concepts which Simone de Beauvoir presents early in this book which are essential to the development of the whole. The first is that of existentialist ethics:

There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the "en-soi" — the brutish life of subjection to given conditions — and of liberty into constraint and contingency. This downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil. Every individual concerned to justify his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects.

Now, what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she — a free and autonomous being like all human creatures — nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed

and forever transcended by
 another ego (conscience) which is
 essential and sovereign (1961: xxviii).

This concept of woman as the Other is the second important point. The situation rests on the fact of duality in human consciousness, a duality which finds its most primitive expression as Self vs. Other. Generally the Other also sets itself up as the Self, and the relativity of the concept is manifested: "individuals and groups are forced to recognize the reciprocity of their relations" (1961: xxvii). But woman has never put forward this reciprocal claim, and in understanding why this is so, we must first look at how it came to be that woman and not man became the Other. Why should not both of them have developed as Self, as opposed to animals as the Other?

This relates back to the fact that the human situation is an existential one. What makes for the lack of reciprocity is that the transcendence of individual women is frustrated by their being enslaved to the demands of the species as a whole to a far greater degree than are men. This does not mean that men are less a product of their animal nature than are women, but rather that the demands of the species are not in conflict with their development as individuals. A sexual experience which may itself be transcendental may interfere with the subsequent urge to transcendence in a woman. If she

conceives, she must carry the child for nine months before giving birth to it.

Many of the ovarian secretions function for the benefit of the egg, promoting its maturation and adapting the uterus to its requirements; in respect to the organism as a whole, they make for disequilibrium rather than for regulation — the woman is adapted to the needs of the egg rather than to her own requirements (1961:24).

De Beauvoir says that important as they are, these biological facts do not in themselves explain why woman is the Other:

... the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner of another.... But I deny that [the biological facts] establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes: they fail to explain why woman is the Other... (1961:29).

It is interesting that de Beauvoir makes this point even though she subscribes to certain views as to what constitutes woman's innate nature which are hard to see, I believe, as anything other than myths, or as the behavioural products of cultural myths. She says:

Irregularities in the endocrine secretions react on the sympathetic nervous system, and nervous and muscular control is uncertain. This lack in stability and control underlies woman's emotionalism, which is bound up with circulatory

fluctuations — palpitation of the heart, blushing, and so forth — and on this account women are subject to such displays of agitation as tears, hysterical laughter, and nervous crises (1961:28).

Now even if these reactions do have biochemical stimuli, how can we say that these stimuli themselves are not responses to different social pressures on females and males? Some of them seem to be so clearly parts of the circle of self-fulfilling prophecy about women. For instance, a girl may want to involve herself in what is regarded by her culture as a masculine activity. She is discouraged from doing so, and her frustration manifests itself in various "nervous crises" which are pointed to as evidence that the belief she was unfit for the desired pursuit was a well-founded one. As John Stuart Mill says in The Subjection of Women, referring to the supposed "nervous temperament of females: "Much of all this is the mere overflow of nervous energy run to waste" (1869:194). De Beauvoir continues:

Woman is weaker than man: she has less muscular strength, fewer red blood corpuscles, less lung capacity; she runs more slowly, can lift less heavy weights, can compete with man in hardly any sport; she cannot stand up to him in a fight. To all this weakness must be added the instability, the lack of control, and the fragility

already discussed: these are the facts. Her grasp on the world is thus more restricted; she has less firmness and less steadiness available for projects that in general she is less capable of carrying out. In other words, her individual life is less rich than man's (1961:30-1).

Again, it seems rather that her grasp has been more restricted, by society. She is therefore made weaker.

It is important that even with such views as to what the biological facts are, de Beauvoir still does not see them as sufficiently ~~explaining~~ explaining woman's role as the Other. An understanding of this state comes rather from looking at human history in the light of the nature of female and male people, both existential creatures, who, unlike animals, are naturally striving for constant self transcendence:

Woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming, and it is in her becoming that she should be compared with man; that is to say, her possibilities should be defined. ...the fact is also that when we have to do with a being whose nature is transcendent action, we can never close the books (1961:30).

To return to the core of de Beauvoir's explanation as to how woman could have become the Other: what primarily distinguishes people from animals is their existential consciousness and striving for self-transcendence.

The striving found fulfillment in the creation and use of tools which, even in the earliest hunting societies, freed people from many of the contingencies of the natural world; and began, I believe, by this very fact a process of actually attempting to control that world. But although woman was capable in herself of sharing in this transcendence of the natural world, although she was perfectly able as an individual to wield spears, sail canoes, or participate in whatever adventures, she was not free to be such an individual because of the children whom she had to nurse and protect.

Her misfortune was to have been biologically destined for the repetition of Life, when even in her own view Life does not carry within itself its reasons for being, reasons that are more important than the life itself (1961: 59).

The more then that man achieved self-realization by transcending the situation of animals, the more would woman have felt the frustration of the conflict between species and self. And the more would man have come to see woman as a manifestation of nature rather than humanity, as the distance between nature and humanity grew in his consciousness.

De Beauvoir continues from her discussion of early hunters to focus on the significance of the development of agriculture. In the earliest societies in which it

was involved, she says, "agricultural labour was entrusted to women" (1961:62). But woman's relation to the work is primarily a magical rather than a creative one:

... the husbandman marvelled at the mystery of the fecundity that burgeoned in his furrows and in the maternal body; ... able to summon ancestral spirits into her body, she would also have the power to cause fruits and grain to spring up from planted fields. In both cases there was no question of a creative act, but of a magic conjuration (1961:62).

The process is still essentially a mysterious one, subject to the whims of nature, and the labour may or may not be fruitful.

Now, I have to take issue with this. In the Trobriand Islands, for example, where gardening is central to livelihood, it is not entrusted to women:

... garden work is done in the Trobriands by everybody, man and woman, chief and commoner....

The most important distinction is that between a man's and woman's part in gardening. A woman never gardens in her own right. She is never styled "owner of a garden" or "owner of a plot" ... The man cuts the scrub; man and woman clear the ground and prepare it for planting; the woman weeds. ... harvesting is done by men and women together. The reknown of good gardening, the praise and other emoluments of ambition, go to the man and not to the woman (Malinowski, 1935:78-9).

But furthermore, the garden magician (a hereditary position) is male, either the Chief (head-man) or someone in his lineage (1935: 64).

The problem with de Beauvoir's view arises from the fact that she is dealing with such a vast problem, a long historical process much of which will probably be forever obscure. In generalizing to simplify the picture, much of it is distorted. She says, for instance, that sterile women have often been, or are, considered dangerous to a garden, whereas the opposite applies to pregnant women (1961: 63). I think that is a valid point to back up what she wants to get across; and while I do not agree with her argument, I do with her conclusions: the crucial point she makes being that woman has value in man's eyes only insofar as she is representative of the mysterious process of nature:

To be sure, [man] realized more or less clearly the effectiveness of the sexual act and of the techniques by which he brought the land under cultivation. Yet children and crops seemed none the less to be gifts of the gods, and the mysterious emanations from the female body were believed to bring into this world the riches latent in the mysterious sources of life (1961: 63).

So even if her sterility or fertility is important, she herself as a person is not.

Man's relation to her is essentially one of fear

rather than love. A woman is not recognized personally for her contribution to the garden as is a man. She is not accepted for what she is or can do, which is essentially what I mean by using the word "love". What she is left with, then, is a role as mother — as a member of the species rather than an individual. Through her there occurs in the human realm a universal natural process. Insofar as man's relationship to nature is one of dealing with the power of this process to tame and tap it for human benefit, his relationship to woman has been one of fear.

Woman is an incarnation of nature in that she maintains, rather than creates, as de Beauvoir frequently puts it, in her contribution to the social life.

She remained doomed to immanence, incarnating only the static aspect of society, closed in upon itself. Whereas man went on monopolizing the functions which threw open that society toward nature and toward the rest of humanity (1961: 68).

De Beauvoir goes on to suggest how better tools and agricultural techniques might have developed which freed humanity to such a point from feeling at nature's mercy that the structure of society itself began to change: patriarchal societies were born.

Formerly [man] was possessed by the mana, by the land; now he has a soul,

owns certain lands; freed from Woman,
 he now demands for himself a woman
 and a posterity (1961:72).

Woman became valuable as a source of heirs, in terms of property, as property.

Man's necessary part in procreation was realized, but beyond this it was affirmed that only the father engenders, the mother merely nourishes the germ received into her body, as Aeschylus says in the Eumenides. Aristotle states that woman is only matter, whereas movement, the male principle, is "better and more divine". In making posterity wholly his, man achieved domination of the world and subjugation of woman (1961:73).

Again, we see that woman is "doomed to immanence".

De Beauvoir sketches the reflection of this process in the myths of the Mediterranean area, with the mother-goddess everywhere being replaced by a supreme or at least superior male deity. The "God" of the Bible is of course a patriarch. But it is important to keep in mind that even as mother-goddess woman was not valued as an equal in a reciprocal relationship. The female was an object of fear in religious worship.

This fear is most directly related to our existential consciousness. I have touched on self-transcendence as involving an increasing freedom from the natural world in which animals live, basically at the mercy of their

environment. Such is the way in which de Beauvoir approaches transcendence. This is to her mind the most obvious way for a person to seek setting herself or himself up as Self. The most significant natural contingency is of course the inevitability of the death of the individual self. The fear of woman parallels a fear of this inevitable natural course of things, of the Other which threatens the ego.

The mother dooms her son to death
in giving him life. ... Born of the
flesh, the man in love finds fulfillment
as flesh, and the flesh
is destined to the tomb (de Beauvoir, 1961:154).

This, then, is the reason why
woman has a double and deceptive
visage: she is all that man desires
and all that he does not attain.
She is the good mediatrix between
propitious Nature and man; and
she is the temptation of uncon-
quered Nature, counter to all
goodness (1961:184-5).

I will be exploring this relationship in the context of Australian Aboriginal culture in the next section of this chapter. Actually, I interpret woman as seen in that situation to be an ambiguous rather than good mediatrix between man and nature, because of what makes woman, as the immediate source of human life, synonymous with nature. Because of the uncertainty arising from this connection, woman is virtually excluded from religious

activity, which is concerned with directing the power of nature to ends of benefit to humans.

In Chapter 7 I also refer to this pattern as it appears in the context of Buddhism which emphasizes life as suffering. Woman, seen as the source of life, is thereby made the source of suffering.

The fear of woman is man's fear inasmuch as she has become identified for him with the Other. But the urge to transcendence, the striving for self-realization, belongs just as much to the soul of woman as it does to man. Soul is androgynous, or sexless — depending upon the importance of the body in one's choice of spiritual path.

In the course of the history of Western cultures especially, man left woman behind, in a sense, because she could not keep up with the "creative" developments which opened up for him: she was busy "maintaining" — bearing and rearing the next generation. Given de Beauvoir's view of transcendence as the urge to extend one's grasp upon the world — in Western cultures this has been manifested in a distinctly materialistic manner — then woman, in maintaining, has been in a virtually impossible situation as a social being. She could not directly participate in the essence of culture.

What troubles me about this kind of transcendence is that it hardly seems a spiritual kind of striving. It

strikes me as being very selfish, very negative. It is a running away from something that we are part of, a running away by attempting to separate from and control that whole, and the ultimate consequences of this now appear to be a meddling with the balance of nature which may bring about the demise of our species, as it already has others.

Granted that all cultural traditions to at least some extent use tools which free them from some of the uncertainties of nature, and that many of these traditions still recognize very clearly and beautifully that we are merely part of a whole, and that we must give to balance what we take. But it is obvious that there are others, primarily our own, which have developed in such a way that our place has been forgotten. There has been this most fundamental weakness in our tradition, one of ego preventing us from accepting the gift of life on its own terms, because of the fear of this ego aware of its own transience.

I am not saying that Simone de Beauvoir is wrong in her idea of what transcendence has been for that part of humanity which has so greatly changed the world in which we live. I feel compelled to agree with her about that. But I do most strongly disagree with her apparent assumption that our western tradition is a manifestation of the only way in which such transcendence could be fulfilled

on the individual and cultural levels. It strikes me that much of what she says is, ironically, an expression of the male-oriented values of her culture. She herself of course deals with this issue, that the only way in which a woman can approach self-realization is often to accept what men have defined as worthwhile, and what they will grant to women who grant them the favours they want. As I have already quoted: "He it is who opens up the future to which she also reaches out" (1961: 59). And de Beauvoir appears to value as self-fulfilling those very ego-fortifying pursuits through which men have scarred the world, e.g.: "Today he still manifests this pride when he has built a dam or a skyscraper or an atomic pile" (1961: 58).

Here is a very complicated issue. If the focus of what is distinctly human about our social life is primarily an expression of male orientation in the world, then this focus constitutes an oppression of women. I do not mean to imply that women's psychological orientation is different. Perhaps if they were not tied to maintaining the species, women would have indulged in those pursuits which enlarged the territory of man at war with nature. Given that a society sees transcendence in this way, then the biological fact that they bear children is an oppressive force for women. That society may define woman's role as naturally different from man's

does not at all change the situation, because the social definition is at odds with nature, and women are defined as destined for a different life because they are tied more directly to nature. The definitions are made by men, not women. Society is male.

Now here we can see the difference between de Beauvoir's view of transcendence and what I see as spirituality. In her view the oppression of women consists fundamentally in the fact that their transcendence as people is frustrated by male society's fearful view of natural process. I would add to this an oppression of the spiritual consciousness of both women and men. For men this is a moral failing: their consciously perceived relation to the world is conditioned by fear rather than acceptance. Their desire to grow is false in that it involves a part (ego) growing cancerously at the expense of the whole (true ecological awareness, which includes acceptance of their fellow beings).

I have discussed how individual spiritual fulfillment paradoxically depends upon first experiencing the arbitrary values of society. There is a twofold oppression of women in that it is not even possible, in the situation I have been sketching, to abdicate their spiritual search by their own right, as men in our tradition, as a sex, have done. Because if social life is oppressive to all individuals in its arbitrariness, it is also divided within

itself so that a woman cannot even fully experience what it arbitrarily values most as befitting humans, let alone transcend it. Truly spiritual transcendence is only possible of something which has been fully experienced. This is not to say that women have to experience the male role, or men the female one; just that either must be able to understand the limitations of being sexually stereotyped. But a religious ritual, for instance, often provides an experience of seeing that sex roles are a cultural affair, and yet women may be excluded from that ritual, thus being denied at least that means of the experience.

But then the question arises as to whether this state of affairs by itself could not be an experience of this arbitrariness. I think it could to a certain extent: the oppression might make an awareness which transcends social values more accessible to women, but I am doubtful as to its spiritual potential. Life is still lived in society, and such awareness, constantly confronted by social realities, and its own related personal suffering, would very likely become one of cynical detachment rather than affirmation and compassion for others in their suffering. I think it would entail a definition of oneself as opposed to an other: us against them; female against male. While this would, in a sense, turn the tables on men, it would still be a very trying state of mind to maintain in a male-

dominated society, where one's self-assertion could not be realized in social life. As I have said, for a consciousness to be spiritual, it must be viable in the sense of being fulfilled in action. At this point, I believe it becomes clearer that the situation of women as opposed to men is an oppressive one; for in a male-dominated society the possibilities for action, for making decisions which affect one's life and the lives of others, are greater for men.

Of course, the line where spiritual oppression begins can be drawn earlier, if it is felt that social oppression — exclusion from religious activities, for example — is not conducive to a culture-transcending awareness, let alone to spiritual growth. And I do think this is probably true in most cases: it would take an exceptionally strong person to become aware by being oppressed. It must be remembered that hardly all societies are as much in flux, or as aware of other cultures, as is our own. In such societies it would be exceedingly difficult to imagine alternatives to one's social condition.

But the situation of men, while it may be less oppressive than that of women, is not an open spiritual road. First of all, as long as a man defines himself by virtue of not being a woman, he cannot progress very far: he is excluding all those possibilities for himself which his society sees as female. Secondly, even if he ceases to

define himself in this manner, he cannot ultimately realize his awareness in action; unless, in the end, he challenges the entire nature of sex roles fundamental to the organization of his society.

(ii) Childbearing and Childbirth

I have discussed de Beauvoir's ideas on the significance, for women and for society as a whole, of woman as childbearer; but I have not really focused on the actual experience of bearing and giving birth to children. To consider this is difficult for me, because even if I am prepared to discard all of our cultural definitions of male and female, there is here a very real experience which I simply cannot have as a woman can. But for reasons I hope will become evident in my following discussion, I will try to express my related feelings.

De Beauvoir writes:

... giving birth and suckling are not activities, they are natural functions: no project is involved; and that is why woman found in them no reason for a lofty affirmation of her existence — she submitted passively to her biologic fate (1961:57).

Now I do not think she is suggesting that no women should

have children. Rather that the decision should be their's alone; and that, fated with this burden, they should nevertheless (to put it mildly) have the same opportunities for individual expression open to them as do men. But again, I see her view of childbearing and giving birth in the same way I relate to her view of what constitutes transcendence. It seems so negative — what is valued in life is divorced from the source of all life, of possibility. It therefore becomes an impossibility in that the pursuit destroys, as we are witnessing, the universe from which the process began.

But it may be that natural functions are not "lofty" only if society sees it that way. If males had an appreciation for childbirth, not just because it can be a source of heirs, but as an experience beautiful in itself, and if they took an active part in child care, would such negative attitudes be as likely to be expressed? Parallel to the separation from nature among us is the view of creativity as something coming entirely from the ego, rather than as the individual self being a particular instrument of expression, a medium, for the energy of nature. Again, some of de Beauvoir's ideas seem to me an expression of the very values she is criticizing. (Perhaps it seems I am asking an awful lot of someone. I am aware that it is all too easy to criticize people who contribute greatly to our understanding, when they open our eyes and we do not

see exactly what they see. I hope it is understood that my criticism is based on a profound overall appreciation, otherwise I would not be so concerned with de Beauvoir's ideas.)

Shulamith Firestone would probably see the preceding paragraph as a manifestation of the "reactionary hippie-Rousseauian Return-to-Nature". In The Dialectic of Sex she says:

Pregnancy is barbaric: I do not believe, as many women are now saying, that the reason pregnancy is viewed as not beautiful is due strictly to a cultural perversion. ...Pregnancy is the temporary deformation of the body for the sake of the species.

Moreover, childbirth hurts. And it isn't good for you. ...Natural childbirth is only one more part of the reactionary hippie-Rousseauian Return-to-Nature, and just as self-conscious (1971:199).

I do in a sense believe very strongly in the necessity of a return to nature: clearly, our technology, whatever benefits it may have brought us, threatens to destroy the very basis of our lives; at the same time it keeps us so divorced from that basis that we are not aware of the danger. There are people who are aware of this who want to return to "nature" in a reactionary way, following a dogma which is so consciously the obverse of that of our urban society that it is probably just as restricting. It can involve a return to bad as well as good, that is,

to some idea of the ideal primitive society where women have babies and cook, men hunt, etc.. This is not what I mean. I am talking about being receptive rather than aggressive toward ourselves and our world — receptivity is not at all antithetical to creativity.

Getting back to the matter of pregnancy and childbirth: Firestone quotes a negative childbirth experience of a woman she knows (1971:199). While I have no reason to question this, I know women who have enjoyed having children. A friend who is a mother says that to her knowledge de Beauvoir was not writing from the personal experience of being a mother; and since Firestone does not speak of giving birth herself, I assume the same applies to her. My friend says she knows it can be beautiful, regardless of the attitudes and degree of involvement of other people, and that even the pain is not necessarily experienced in a negative way. I would imagine that the last point depends to an extent on the degree to which one has or has not transcended cultural values: someone who believes in the Book of Genesis, where it is said that childbirth entails pain as punishment for Eve's actions, is not likely to feel that pain as anything but negative (Genesis 3:16).

Again, the crucial point is that it be a matter of choice. But in a society where being a mother is seen as a woman's destiny, it is really difficult, if not impossible,

to speak of choice — even if there were, as there are not yet, completely safe and reliable methods of birth control. The cultural value of motherhood is a religious value, and it is spiritually oppressive. Inasmuch as there is danger and pain involved in bearing children, it is of course physically oppressive as well.

That a birth control pill was developed for women first perhaps reveals much about the sexism in our culture, and in human society generally.¹ I do not know if there are good scientific reasons for this, and would probably be unable to judge them if there were. But as for the argument that this was the obvious place to begin, because women are the ones who become pregnant, I do not find it completely satisfactory. Its truth may be a deceptive one, which belies our attitude, going back to Eve, that the woman should be held responsible. Given the growing awareness of the health hazards of the pill, and of the frequent incompetence and lack of concern of the predominantly male doctors who prescribe it, it seems to me that women are used as guinea pigs, thereby given only the illusion of choice, while men are that much more freed from responsibility.

I have suggested a relationship between the pain involved in childbirth and cultural attitudes, a point which is frequently made in anthropological literature. Of the Australian Aborigines, R. and C. Berndt have written:

As a rule childbirth is fairly easy, although often women experience difficulty with their first child, and there are cases of a woman being in labour for a long period. Ashley-Montagu²...on the evidence of several writers ...states categorically that childbirth is a comparatively light affair for the woman, "who is usually up and about her regular duties within a few hours after the delivery of the child". It is true that childbirth, especially for the second or subsequent children, may not be such a traumatic experience as for many Western European women: but it is not such an easy business as Ashley-Montagu implies (1964:126).

Perhaps then, as a generalization, we could say that the ease or difficulty of childbirth varies from one culture to another, and that we must not romanticize cultures where it is generally easier than in our own.³

Similarly, could the uncomfortable or painful symptoms that may accompany menstruation be related to cultural attitudes? Some might feel it to be one of nature's drags on their living, as a curse; but others might feel good at the signs of being tied in with the cyclical processes of nature. Compare these two situations. First, this statement of a Viennese girl as quoted by de Beauvoir from Stekel's Frigidity in Woman:

When I finally began to menstruate and my father came across the blood-stained clothes on one occasion, there was a terrible scene. How did it happen that he, so clean a man, had to live among such dirty females (de Beauvoir, 1961:305).

Second, on the other hand, the attitude of the BaMbuti Pygmies to a girl's first menstruation, as described by Colin Turnbull in The Forest People:

The whole affair is rather shameful in the eyes of the villagers, as well as a dangerous one. It is something best concealed and not talked about in public. The girl is an object of suspicion, scorn, repulsion, and anger. It is not a happy coming of age.

For the Pygmies, the people of the forest, it is a very different thing. To them blood, in the usual context in which they see it, is equally dreadful. But they recognize it as being the symbol not only of death, but also of life. And menstrual blood to them means life. Even between a husband and a wife it is not a frightening thing, though there are certain restrictions connected with it. In fact, the Pygmies consider that any couple that really wants to have children should "sleep with the moon!"

So when a young Pygmy girl begins to flower into maturity, and blood comes to her for the first time, it comes to her as a gift, received with gratitude and rejoicing — rejoicing that the girl is now a potential mother, that she can now proudly and rightfully take a husband. There is no question of fear or superstition, and everyone is told the good news (1962:186-7).

I do not mean to imply, of course, that bad pregnancy and childbirth experiences are any where near as likely to be culturally conditioned as bad menstruation experiences appear to be, or that these experiences are comparable in their magnitude. The fact remains that childbirth can be fatal.

What I am trying to suggest, in summary, is that while the decision to have children should of course be up to the individual woman involved, the factors on which that decision is based may themselves be confused by cultural conditioning. This process of influence must be examined and understood so that what is not universally true may be recognized for the arbitrary set of values it is. It is really only then that the choice can be a free one.

(iii) Myths Concerning the Origin of Sexual Divisions in Social Life

There are two cultural traditions I will touch on briefly here, those of the Aborigines of North-eastern Arnhem Land in northern Australia, and the BaMbuti Pygmies of the Ituri Forest in the Congo.

(a) North-eastern Arnhem Land

Reading R. Berndt's Kunapipi and W. L. Warner's A Black Civilization, it seems that there are several myths explaining social and cultural origins which co-exist in this area (and elsewhere in Australia), each with its own related ritual cult. Myths and rituals are

grouped in constellations, several around a single core myth, as it were. The core is itself a kind of rationale for the others, which often appear to have been introduced (at least according to the myths themselves) from different places and at different times (Berndt, 1951:xxv; Warner, 1958:248ff). According to Berndt, a myth recognized by the people as introduced from outside is altered if necessary so as to be amenable to integration with the existing body of mythology (1951:xxix). I am assuming then, keeping Burridge's definition of religion in mind, that a myth can be looked at as expressing in some way a social reality which is existentially valid for at least that part of society involved in the related religious activities.

There are two main constellations of cycles of myth and related ceremony in North-eastern Arnhem Land, the Wauwalak and Djangawul — as written by Berndt; Warner refers to the Wawilak and Djungkao. Warner and Berndt deal with neighbouring peoples whom, says Berndt, have other contacts with different areas respectively (1951:2). According to Berndt, the Wauwalak constellation centres around the Great Mother of Fertility Mother (1951:xxv), while the Djangawul is the inspiration of a "virile" cult (1951:xxviii) and is concerned with "higher" religious thought (1951:8).

The Djangawul myth concerns four Ancestral Beings from the mythic time or Dreaming: a man, Djangawul; his two

sisters; and a male companion of minor importance. They landed on the Arnhem Land coast and travelled about populating the land with the ancestors of the present people. Djangawul had an elongated penis and the clitoris of each of his sisters dragged on the ground. He kept them perpetually pregnant and would remove by hand from inside them the children who are the ancestors, leaving them at camps they made along the way.

The song cycle [the myth is comprised of several hundred lengthy songs] features the perpetual pregnancy of the two sisters, their uteri being likened to the ngainmara mats which they brought with them, while the people who are removed from them in childbirth are the rangga. It is said that a person's bones are like rangga, inherited from both the father and mother, who in turn inherited theirs through the generations of ancestors, right back to the Eternal Times of Djangawul and the creative heroes. Therefore, at death, a person's material remains, as well as his spiritual substance, must be treated with respect, and surrounded by ritual.

An important aspect of this myth, second only to the theme of fertility, concerns the institution of sacred ritual. In the beginning, so it relates, the Djangawul sisters themselves were the sole guardians of the religious objects and associated ceremonies. They were well acquainted with all the sacred ritual and doctrine, because this ultimately concerned them; the symbols they used, and their actions in dancing, made reference to the sexual act, to pregnancy and birth. Aboriginal men today speak definitely on this point: "Then we had nothing; no sacred objects, no sacred ceremonies, the women had everything." So one day, the myth continues, the men stole the women's objects while they

were out collecting mussels; they took them back to their own camp, and there performed the special sacred dancing. The Djangawul sisters, coming back with their shellfish, found that their rangga had disappeared. They heard, in the distance, the singing of the men; and finally they decided that perhaps it was just as well that the men had taken their rangga. It would save them a lot of trouble, they agreed; now the men could carry out most of the ritual for them, while they busied themselves chiefly with raising families and collecting food. In this way, their true function as Fertility Mothers became established. Such an attitude is not confined to north-eastern Arnhem Land, but appears in the mythology of other Australian Aboriginal tribes. However, women still play an important part in sacred ritual, for instance in the Kunapipi (Berndt, 1951:7-8).

There is then, in this "virile" cult, a rationale for the exclusion of women from the core of religious life and for their being relegated to what are essentially activities which "maintain". The myth suggests that women accept this sexual division of social functions, yet it is a religious expression of the men. I will deal in the next chapter with why I think this reflects a social situation which is oppressive to women in the senses I have already discussed. Several anthropologists (anthro-apologists?) dealing with Australia try to point out that women are not totally excluded from rituals and knowledge of the myths, that their role is recognized by the men, and that their religious status is therefore pretty well equal to that of the

men — they perform reciprocal functions. I find myself doubtful about this: the statements to this effect are too often of the order of "even though women are excluded from, they share in ...", which seems to me a kind of parallel in intellectual terms to the very rationalization involved in the myths themselves. This gets us nowhere. The following quotation from Berndt is a case in point:

Indeed, men stress that in the Dreaming Period women initially possessed all sacred ritual, and lost it only through the men's duplicity. ...Merely because they do not join in certain of the most sacred mysteries, women do not feel "left out" of things, or pushed aside into what has been termed by some writers a profane existence, with attendant feelings of inferiority. On the contrary, they realize they have a supplementary function in maintaining camp dancing, and answering the men's ritualistic calls from the sacred ground. It is necessary, for instance, that they prepare food for the men at such times, and observe certain tabus. ...This is simply a normal extension of the sexual division of labour and activity (1951:18-19).

Yes, it certainly is.

To turn to the Wauwalak cycle, which according to Berndt has a "far more general application" than the Djangawul (1951:9): the Djangawul myth expresses mostly what appears to be indigenous doctrine for the Yirrkalla (those Aborigines Berndt is concerned with), and the Wauwalak Sisters are children of the Djangawul. (The

Kunapipi myth and ritual is a still later introduction to the area.) The Wauwalak Sisters are said to have left their Dreaming home after committing clan incest. At some point during their travels towards Arnhem Land — it depends on which version, from which area, is followed (Warner, 1958:250-59; Berndt, 1951:19-27) they have children, or one of them has a child. The afterbirth blood and/or menstrual blood pollutes the sacred well where lives the great Rainbow Serpent, the impregnating or male symbol (Berndt, 1951:12 and 21), who devours them and the child (children). But their spirits relate the sacred ritual knowledge to two Dreaming men. This includes the origin of circumcision (Warner, 1958:258).

Among the Yirrkalla, the Wauwalak are said to be the daughters of the Great Mother, Kunapipi.

She is said to be responsible for the constant fertility of human beings and other natural species, and the continuing sequence of the seasons, as well as for the general similarity of her ritual, emblems and songs (Berndt, 1951:xxv).

Throughout the greater part of the Northern Territory the concept of a Fertility Mother is found. She is the direct or indirect inspiration of all religious thought and activity. She is the central theme of the Kunapipi ceremonies. Indeed, Kunapipi is one of her sacred names. Her "eternal" presence throws new light on the philosophy of totemism in this region, for it was she, herself without a totem, who brought the totems into being (1951:xxvii).

Keeping in mind what de Beauvoir says about why woman's place in religion as a fertility goddess does not at all mean that she has a similarly high status in social life, it becomes understandable that Aboriginal women do not participate equally with the men in the Kunapipi and other cults centred around the Wauwalak myth, let alone in the "virile" Djangawul cult. If women were excluded from the "inside" (i.e., from the sacred) because of men's duplicity, then this duplicity continues with social practice. Berndt's and others' attempts to stress an essential equality seem to me rather to be almost apologies for failing to come to grips with the basic question of sexual separation — of men as sacred and women as profane.

The profanity of women seems to be implied in the Wauwalak myth itself:

By leaving the women in this way,
[the animals] tried to indicate that
the well was tabu, and that it was
against the religious code to cook
or sit near it. But the women did
not realize the mistake they were
making (Berndt, 1951:21).

I understand these myths, then, as justifying the social situation by explaining it as derived from origins in the Dreaming. The explanation, the mythical knowledge, is primarily the prerogative of the males, and the initiates into the fertility cult are male. This circle

of rationalization leaves the oppressors guiltless in terms of the social context.

It is noteworthy that the subincision of the penis in the Kunapipi ceremony is seen as a representation of the uterus (Berndt 1951:16). Does the male come to symbolically perform the one function which is otherwise granted to women as ~~their~~ domain?⁴

How does all this tie in with the conception of woman as the Other? Perhaps at first the idea of woman as the Other as a result of her not sharing in man's existing as over against nature does not seem to hold up here. After all, the Aborigines are highly conscious of the inter-relatedness of all forms of life. Their myths can even be seen as maps of the actual physical geography in which they live, explaining the existence of the precious waterholes, for example, and the cycle of the seasons and related supply of food. The food situation in Arnhem Land, largely a coastal area, isn't a difficult one, and it would be hard to imagine the people feeling at the mercy of a cruel nature (Berndt, 1951:2).

Yet in perceiving the relationships, Aborigines seem to say also that they may cease to work for the benefit of people if people do not express their distinctly human part in the whole in a distinctly human way.

The cosmos is turned in, as it were,
on man. Its transforming energy is

threaded on to the lives of individuals so that nothing happens in the way of storms, sickness, blights or droughts except in virtue of these personal links. So the universe is man-centred in the sense that it must be interpreted by reference to humans (Mary Douglas, 1966:103-4).

Perhaps de Beauvoir's view of transcendence may be too Western to apply it here in a literal way, but I will still use it as a reference point. The position of humans with respect to the rest of nature is mediated by symbols as well as by manual tools. For the Aborigines, there is still a feeling of a potentially uncertain outcome of the natural process. The purpose of ritual is

... primarily, to ensure the continuation of the human species; the increase of all other animals, birds, fish, vegetable matter, and so on, is only an adjunct to the main theme (Berndt, 1951:6).

Is this why women are so much excluded from religious knowledge and activity? The emphasis on woman ~~is as a~~ fertile source, without which social life would be impossible, but from which it is quite distinct (—"it was she, herself without a totem, who brought the totems into being"). Woman is identified then more with nature than with human-kind as distinct from nature. It is the fertility of their women, too, which men want to increase by their ceremonies. Perhaps subincision as referred to indicates a mistrust that women's fertility would work for the benefit of society

if left up to them. Contact with the source of power, of fertility, can only be made by the men because women are seen by men as too identified with that very source. (The "mistake" of the Wauwalak Sisters comes to mind.) When the realm of nature was all there was, in the Dreaming, woman possessed the sacred knowledge and objects; but, according to this religion, if society is to function, the sacred must be the prerogative of man.

(b) The BaMbuti Pygmies

The woman is not discriminated against in BaMbuti society as she is in some African societies. She has a full and important role to play. There is relatively little socialization according to sex. Even the hunt is a joint effort. A man is not ashamed to pick mushrooms and nuts if he finds them, or to wash and clean a baby. A woman is free to take part in the discussions of men, if she has something relevant to say
(Turnbull, 1962:154).

The nature of BaMbuti hunting in the Ituri Forest is such that children can be included. Turnbull mentions a nine-year-old on one hunt. The women and younger children act as beaters and noisemakers to drive the game into the men's nets (1962:99-102).

The huts which they share with their husbands are women's property, and they can break up a marriage by taking down the hut (1962:132-3).

Yet there are some points in The Forest People which seem to me to indicate that male-female relationships are not totally reciprocal. Marriage is by sister exchange. Not taking this to imply inevitable inequality, there is still a suggestion that women are not as free as men regarding marriage. While they may not in the end be forced into a relationship against their will, it appears that there can be heavy opposition in the form of collective opinion and even rather brutal beatings (1962:204;207ff.). And there is an instance described by Turnbull of a situation where the women seem to be seen partly as objects, in the sense of being means for the men of saying something to each other:

Amabosu countered by smacking [his wife] firmly across the face. Normally Ekianga would have approved of such manly assertion of authority over a disloyal wife, but as the wife was his sister he retaliated by going into his hut and dragging out Kamaikan [Amabosu's sister, Ekianga's wife] whom he in turn publicly smacked across her face (1962:122-3).

To turn to the sphere of religion:

... when something big goes wrong, like illness or bad hunting or death, it must be because the forest is sleeping and not looking after its children. So what do we do? We wake it up. We wake it up by singing to it, and we do this because we want it to awaken happy. Then everything will be well and good again (1962:92).

The Pygmies call out the molimo on such occasions. It is a trumpet-like thing, made of anything from wood to rusty drainpipes, through which they sing and make animal sounds. The molimo seemed to Turnbull to be the one aspect of social life which was exclusively male. When the men come clamouring through the camp with the molimo, the women and children must be inside, or risk their lives — so it is said. The women supposedly believe that the molimo sounds are those of some great animal or spirit of the forest which only the men can control.

Yet Turnbull found out that this is all pretense — the women know it is a trumpet, and the men know the women know For on the occasion of the particular molimo ceremony coinciding with the period of initiation for several of the girls, the girls sing, and lead the singing of, the sacred molimo songs around the sacred hearth. But what is more, the very old and respected woman who has come from a neighbouring group to teach and guide the girl initiates goes through through a ritual struggle with the men. She scatters and almost puts out the sacred fire, with her kicks; the men pile it up again. The process is repeated twice more, before the old woman desists. She then ties all the men to each other around their necks. One of the men, Moke, says: "This woman has tied us up. She has bound the men, bound the hunt, and bound the molimo. We can do nothing" (1962:155). They give the woman

something as a token of their defeat, and are then freed (1962:150ff.).

There is an old legend that once it was the women who "owned" the molimo, but the men stole it from them and ever since the women have been forbidden to see it (1962:154).

Turnbull continues by asking whether the old woman, in kicking the fire of life in all directions, is destroying it or giving it to the men. It seems to me that her power to do both is implied.

The parallels between this and the Australian situation are striking indeed. What de Beauvoir says about "mankind" vs. nature goes to the depths and origins of human consciousness itself. The power of woman, like the power of nature, is ambiguous as far as it concerns human society. To assure that the forest keeps the good of people in mind, the communion with the power of the forest is effected through the man.

(iv) Further Reflections

This section is an attempt to tie in the preceding discussion on particular myths and related rituals with some of the basic ideas I have put forward so far in the

paper — to do this in a more explicit way than was, I trust, implicit in the discussion itself. Here I work with and through some of the fundamental ideas presented by Mary Douglas in Purity and Danger, and I should mention that much of what I am expressing came together for me as a result of reading this book a couple of years ago. I certainly remember the feeling then of communication with a kindred spirit.

As I quoted her in the previous discussion on the Aborigines, "... the universe is man-centred in the sense that it must be interpreted with reference to humans". I have been saying, in reference to the Arnhem Landers and the BaMbuti, why I think that in order to ensure that the universe is man-centred, using "man" to mean human society, then it must be man-centred in ritual, "man" meaning "male". At least this is seen so in these religious beliefs, perhaps more so in the case of the Arnhem Landers.

Why is it that these cultures have myths and rituals in which their everyday religious expressions of the relationship between themselves and the universe are put in such a light of relativity? These seem to be examples of

... cults which invite their initiates to turn round and confront the categories on which their whole surrounding culture has been built up and to recognize them for the fictive, man-made arbitrary creations that they are (Douglas, 1966:200).

The way in which this happens in ritual involves an accepting into actual experience (in the ritual context) of something which in any other situation would be utterly contrary to social practice, and polluting in the sense of threatening the order which religion guarantees as the truth of things. Such is the nature of the pangolin cult among the Lele people, with whom Douglas lived (1966:199-201). The pangolin is a scaly anteater which climbs trees and suckles its young, which it bears, unlike other animals, one at a time. It is an anomaly — it is contrary to the whole conceptual order according to which animal species are distinguished from each other. No one may eat it, except in the pangolin cult initiations, as it defies the structure of the Lele world. Similarly, Victor Turner says of the initiates among the neighbouring Ndembu that they are secluded in the bush or disguised with masks or paint, "... since it is a paradox, a scandal, to see what ought not to be there!" (1967:98) The initiates, by virtue of being in a transitional state, are not in the social structure.

Now it is these very things which do not fit into the structure which are the source of the power in terms of which it functions: the fertile void, so to speak. Douglas says these rituals are in a sense turning weeds and cuttings into compost (1966:193). Outside of the structure, one is in the realm of danger, yet it is also

the "... realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise"(Turner, 1967:97).

Order can only come out of initial chaos:

It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created (Douglas, 1966:15).

Back again at the fundamental duality in human consciousness.

Now, I said in Chapter 2 that, although the process of establishing these differentiations is made explicit, and thereby transcended, in some rituals, this does not mean that the significance of this is fully grasped by each participant. Well, perhaps in the BaMbuti situation it is grasped; but in a very real sense, only in the ritual context — because in life as it is lived every day the discriminations are still operative and they have very real effects on what individuals experience. And actually, in the Australian situation, given that women do not even participate equally, or reciprocally, in the very rituals in which the female principle is appreciated, there is not what can legitimately be called a confrontation with "the categories on which their whole surrounding culture has been built up". Because this confrontation is denied to the women. While on the one hand the men may recognize these categories for the "fictive, man-made arbitrary creations that they are", even to the extent of realizing that this means they are not

"woman-made", on the other hand they continue to perpetuate the same deception with which the myth credits their male ancestors.

Douglas says:

... as life must be affirmed, the most complete philosophies, as William James put it, must find some ultimate way of affirming that which has been rejected (1966:193).

I cannot see the philosophy of the Arnhem Landers as being complete, as being spiritual. There is no affirmation at all, because affirmation of what has been rejected is denied to those who have been rejected. In both this and the BaMbuti situation, there is nothing spiritual about whatever realizations explicitly occur, as they are not put into practice — they are not moral decisions.

I would say further, then, that if the ritual experience of the arbitrary nature of the social order is itself differentiated from social life, then there has been no true affirmation of what has been rejected — there is still a hanging on to the ego.

Perhaps it seems I am asking the impossible of human beings; but I do not think it strange to pursue some sort of millenarian vision. Our society is in such a state of chaos — the capitalist Protestant ethic is no longer felt by many to guarantee perception of the truth of things — that, while perceiving our misfortune, we are also able to perceive the "realm of pure possibility". And however

cynical we may be about the realization of this perception, our lives can have no growth and no meaning if our experience isn't open to fulfilling the possibilities of our vision, however painful this may be.

Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise. ... The final paradox of the search for purity is that it is an attempt to force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction. But experience is not amenable and those who make the attempt find themselves led into contradiction (Douglas, 1966:192).

FOOTNOTES

1 Although the condom is now manufactured as a contraceptive, it was originally developed as a prophylactic, to prevent men from catching venereal diseases.

2 Ashley-Montagu, M.F., Coming Into Being Among the Australian Aborigines (London: Routledge, 1937), pp.72-3.

3 Kenelm Burridge has pointed out to me that in no culture is there what can rightly be called "natural" childbirth: the position of the woman's body is always prescribed in some way.

4

This seems to be the situation in our own Western culture:

Freudian logic has succeeded in converting childbirth, an impressive female accomplishment, and the only function its rationale permits her, into nothing more than a hunt for a male organ. It somehow becomes the male prerogative even to give birth, as babies are but surrogate penises. The female is bested at the only function Freudian theory recommends for her, reproduction (Millet, 1970: 185).

CHAPTER 4

THE POSITION OF WOMEN AMONG THE
AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

In this chapter I continue to refer to the information and ideas presented by Warner and Berndt, but I am also largely concerned with discussing Phyllis Kaberry's book, Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane (1939). (Kaberry's research was done among the natives of the Kimberly area to the west of North-eastern Arnhem Land.) Kaberry contests the assertion made by many anthropologists that women in Australia represent the profane element of society, that their social personalities are not at all sacred (e.g., 1939:xi). It is my contention that she indulges in the same kinds of apologies for Aboriginal society's view and treatment of women as I pointed out, for instance, in the writing of Berndt. She says:

... though perhaps [the women] have only a minor role in some of the ceremonies, still, nevertheless, like the men, they

have a direct link with the spiritual forces on which existence depends ...(1939:191).

And further:

... the old women often attended to the ceremonies for lily-roots, fish, wild-honey, yams, and fruit — in fact, most of the foods for which they forage. ... The point is an important one in considering the position of women in religion, for they not only benefit with the rest of the community from the results of these ceremonies, but in old age they take part in them (1939:204).

Now, to say that women also benefit from food increase ceremonies and are thereby included in religious life is to my mind a meaningless argument. If they did not eat then there would be no people to consider in the first place. Well then, to play the devil's advocate, suppose there must be a reason for these foods not being taboo to women, before rejecting this point of Kaberry's. But she says elsewhere, "... the women supply the bulk of the food and their work is more important than that of the men because it is consistently more productive" (1939:270-71). For women to be forbidden the bulk of the food seems to me an impossible basis for the survival of society.

As for the matter of the participation of old women: I take this point as actually undermining Kaberry's argument, for, as Warner says of the Murngin:

The women's group remains ritually undifferentiated in a status sense except for a tendency to give women near or in the menopause preference over younger women in those ceremonies in which women participate. ...This corresponds with the lifting of part of the feeling of taboo around the mother-in-law after she loses many of her secondary sexual characteristics and "gets to be an old woman and looks all the same as a man" (Warner, 1958:132).

The old women are no longer fertile. Looking back to my point about religion being a prerogative of males, because women are seen as too close to nature to be trusted with channelling its energy for the benefit of society, this would not apply, at least so strongly, to women who can no longer bear children. Perhaps this is also why it is an old woman who plays such an important role in the BaMbuti ritual discussed earlier.

As regards the division of labour, Kaberry again traps herself by the very arguments she uses to justify woman's situation, to say that it is not really so bad. She says, for instance, that once the evening meal with her family is finished, a woman must get firewood and water, and see

... to all that pertains to the hearth;
but if this is to be considered humiliating drudgery, it is a fate that she shares with many a European woman (1939:34-5).

I would say, putting it mildly, that the universality of

oppression in no way justifies that oppression.

If, being a woman, Kaberry was able to experience the woman's situation and point of view more directly than were male anthropologists, this does not necessarily mean that what she understands of their situation is the most valuable interpretation of it. This may seem to the reader to be a male chauvinist attitude on my part. I think, on the contrary, that Kaberry is caught up, as are Australian and European women alike, in having to make the most (which isn't much) of living in a male-oriented world. Referring to disputes between people of different hordes, and to the fact that women do not take part in a direct way, but are more like spectators, she writes:

Unless a woman has had a quarrel with her husband, she looks to him for protection and feels herself to be in a large measure identified with his interests (1939:177).

I similarly see Ronald Berndt's opinions as a justification on his part for his own more favourable position in the same male-oriented world.

I would criticize Isobel White's "Aboriginal Women's Status: A Paradox Resolved" in the ~~same~~ manner as I do the work of Kaberry and Berndt. White says:

... Aboriginal women are partners rather than pawns or chattels of the men, but ... their status is

everywhere that of junior partner.

In the conjugal family, the kinship group, and the community, women's rights and duties are clearly defined and accepted. However the rights may be harder to enforce than those of the man and if a woman fails in her obligations, punishment is likely to be more severe and more certain than for a male delinquent, due perhaps to male solidarity seldom countered by female solidarity (1970:21).

The general picture I gain from the literature and from my own personal observation is that women accept this junior status. They occasionally grumble, particularly to other women, and may berate their husbands, but seldom take any positive combined action (1970:23).

Although White does point out that women have a harder time enforcing their rights, the idea of a junior partner seems to ignore her awareness of this state of affairs. I think the anthropologist should ask why women "seldom take any positive combined action", and not merely infer that because they don't, this means they wouldn't like to. Is it, rather, precisely because women are "junior partners", as White describes the paradox of women's status? I do not see it as a paradox, but as a real contradiction which has only been resolved in the mind of the anthropologist. If women were truly partners of any sort with men, would combined action on their part be necessary? I suggest, further, that it seldom occurs because they are not partners but rather juniors, and thus do not have the

power to make such action worthwhile. Power is in the hands of men — as White has said, even women's "rights" do not seem to have the status of men's. I think that may be a reason why, as Kaberry says, women are identified with their husbands' interests: that is, it is the closest they can come to ensuring self-protection.

(i) Women as Objects in the Social Relationships of Men

I do not mean to imply that every man treats his wife as a slave, and that whatever she has in life she has through him. Distinctions must be made between the situation of individuals and the social milieu. A woman may be happy with her husband — they may even have eloped in a marriage which goes against the socially desired pattern of who should marry whom. If a married woman persists in running away from an arranged marriage (residence being patrilocal) she has her way (Kaberry, 1939:149). If her husband is too promiscuous for her, she can leave him (1939:144). According to Kaberry, though men may beat their wives for not collecting enough food, a woman may react the same way to her husband, and bystanders would make sure she was not seriously hurt in such a quarrel (1939:26;142-43). Warner, however, gives what is to my

mind a less bright picture of the Murngin:

Fathers and brothers treat a daughter and sister alike in that (1) they decide to which of her dués [i.e., potential husbands] she will belong; (2) they stand responsible for her loss by runaway marriage, et cetera; (3) they beat her for misconduct; (4) they supply another daughter and sister to her dué if she dies or is sterile; and (5) they come to her assistance if she is excessively mistreated by dué (Warner, 1958:110).

Although some of the above is similar to points made by Kaberry, it also makes it clear that the situation of wives as a whole is not as favourable as that of an individual woman may happen to be. Women seem to be objects mediating the relationships between men!

Warner continues:

... a brother calls his sister "wakinu," i.e., without relatives, and if her husband or anyone else swears at her in her brother's presence the latter throws spears at her and at all his other sisters, even though they are not involved in the quarrel (1958:110).

If he attacked her husband, her brother would be risking a wholesale fight between clans, which is only seen as worthwhile if the mistreatment of his sister has really been brutal. Ironically, to keep the affront from touching himself and his line, the attack on his sister is seen as

the only way out of the dilemma.

Reading Warner, then, it appears that social relations between men, which concern women, are by no means also concerned with women's wellbeing. They work so as to keep overall relations between patrilineal groups functioning with the least amount of conflict.

Kaberry too mentions situations where women seem to me to be used as objects mediating male relationships. For example:

The husband would appear to possess the right to send his wife to the group of men who are intent on putting him to death for some breach of tribal law. They have intercourse with her, and return home without taking further steps against him. Some of the women seemed to regard this particular practice with dislike and disgust (1939:152).

I see some of the points she makes to the effect that there is a "high value placed upon women" (1939:74) in the same way. She gives as evidence of this the facts that a husband-to-be must prove himself a competent hunter, that he must make gifts to his affinal relatives, and that he must undergo hardships in initiation ceremonies. Again, I cannot see this as indicating woman's intrinsic value as a person, recognized by men and society, so much as her economic and political value in intergroup relations.

The operation of this kind of value is clear among the Tiwi of North Australia, as described by Hart and

Pilling, who see marriage among these people as a political affair (1960:28).

In many nonliterate societies, including most, if not all of the mainland Australian tribes, there is a tendency to believe that the main purpose in life for a female is to get married.² The Tiwi subscribed to this idea, but firmly carried it to its logical conclusion; namely, that all females must get married, regardless of age, condition, or inclination. ... Since any female was liable to be impregnated by a spirit at any time [see section (ii) of this chapter], the sensible step was to insist that every female have a husband all the time so that if she did become pregnant, the child would always have a father. ... It can readily be seen that these rules — prenatal betrothal of female infants and immediate remarriage of all widows — effectively eliminated all possibility of an unmarried female from Tiwi society (1960:14). ... The rule of prenatal betrothal obviously gave a great deal of power to the person with the right to betroth, and in Tiwi this right belonged to the husband of the pregnant woman. ... Put bluntly, in Tiwi culture daughters were an asset to their father, and he invested these assets in his own welfare. He therefore bestowed his newly born daughter on a friend or an ally, or someone he wanted as a friend or an ally (1960:14-15).²

This generally meant bestowal upon a man of power and influence, and older man, giving some such men upwards of twenty wives (1960:17). Such extreme polygamy was possible

because males, unlike females, did not have to marry; and younger men, even up to age forty, were thus unlikely to receive wives. An exception might occur if a father wanted to use his daughter as "old-age insurance",

... in which case he selected as her future husband not one of the older adult men who would be old when he himself was old, but a likely looking youngster "with promise"... (1960:15).

Granted, social value does not necessarily preclude acceptance as a person. But I think nevertheless that the social situation does affect very much the possibilities of the individual's situation. Whatever freedom a person of either sex may have, the limits are always there, and they are not limits set by common agreement. One is born into the game and the rules are set. As such they are oppressive to men as well as to women. Yet it seems clear to me that within the game women are much less likely to be able to make the moves, and that the obstacles to their fulfillment as individual people are therefore much greater. I do not doubt that the mysteriousness which is often attributed to women in our own and other cultures (see Chapter 5, section (iii)) is to some extent a very real thing: the subtle wielding of influence is an absolute necessity for survival in a game in which one cannot explicitly make the moves oneself.

(ii) The Relation of Spirit-Children Beliefs to Social Life

In the quotation from Warner in my introductory chapter, he says:

The first life crises occurs when the Murngin soul, through the father's mystic experience, leaves the totemic well and enters the womb of the mother (1958:5-6).

Such spirit-children beliefs exist throughout Australia, their exact form varying from place to place.³ The question of whether the Aborigines are aware of physiological paternity has long been of concern in anthropological literature. Ronald and Catherine Berndt, in The World of the First Australians, say that there is an "impressive array of evidence" from various researchers to support Ashley-Montagu's contention that the Aborigines

... realize sexual intercourse is necessary for conception but do not consider it to be of major importance: that it is not in itself a prerequisite for childbirth, but merely prepares the way for the entry of a spirit child (1964:120).⁴

But they add that from their own experience the issue is no mystery to the people, that the function of semen is recognized (if not absolutely correctly according to us).

Warner says that ritual intercourse in the Gunabibi (Kunapipi) ceremony

... completely demonstrates the fact that the Murngin realize the necessity

of sexual intercourse as part of the reproductive cycle (1958:398).

Kaberry says she is in agreement with Ashley-Montagu (Kaberry, 1939:43).

It appears to me that these differences of opinion are more as to importance, for conception, of intercourse, rather than as to whether it is seen as relevant at all, as I think it can always be said to be. I see the issue as being, more fundamentally, that of the emphasis on the spiritual nature of conception, and the father's leading role in this spiritual experience. (I am here using the word "spiritual" in the sense that Warner does; that is, having to do with spirits). Warner writes:

The spirit comes to the father who is to be, and asks for its mother so that it may be born (1958:21) .

The Murngin baby comes from the totem well through a religious experience of the father, since it is the father who is in touch with the totem world of which the mother is supposed to have no knowledge. The father's mystical dream experience is itself a kind of rite of passage of the unborn and begins the child's socialization. The father's announcement to the mother of the child's arrival (frequently, it must be admitted, after she has reported her pregnancy to the father, who has kept silent, he says to test the validity of his experience) changes the father's age-grade status. It removes certain ritualistic food taboos and definitely establishes his place in the older men's group (1958:159).

Why should the father's role be so emphasized? It is thought of in such a way that the father is the parent who legitimizes the child: he is the one whose experience places it in the social scheme of things. Kaberry, referring to W. Stanner's research on the Daly River tribes, says that "... for a woman who conceives after the death of her husband and does not remarry there is always a mother's brother to give the child social status". (Kaberry, 1939:105).⁵ Of the Kimberley beliefs, she writes:

Conception occurs when one of these [spirit-children] enters a woman. Its presence in the food given her by her husband makes her vomit, and later he dreams of it or else of some animal which he associates with it. It enters his wife by the foot and she becomes pregnant (1939:42).

In her discussion of pregnancy and childbirth, she attempts to show that the mother is not thought of as having no part in the child's development. For instance:

The observance of taboos after childbirth, bound up with the conception that the activities of the mother influence the child, reaffirms the ~~ends~~ existence of a physical tie, rather than minimizes it (1939:57).

And in the concluding paragraph of this discussion, she says:

[Spirit-children beliefs] can be regarded as providing an explanation

of procreation rather than as defining the function of women in the aboriginal cosmogony (1939:60).

Now, if the physical tie between mother and child is emphasized, then I do not see how spirit-children beliefs can be said not to define the place of women in the cosmogony. Rather, I think this is precisely their main function — defining woman's place relative to man. Kaberry's conclusion does of course make sense considering her statement that the people are ignorant of the true nature of physiological paternity. But I doubt the truth of that statement: first, because spirit-children beliefs exist throughout Australia, which includes many groups in which the father's physiological function is understood; second, because ritual intercourse in fertility ceremonies is practised in the Kimberley area, and as Warner says, this practice indicates an awareness of the father's physiological function. The fact that the child's existence as a social being depends upon the father defines woman's place in social life as peripheral, just as it is reflected (and re-defined) in the sphere of ritual.

(iii) Religious Activities

Several fundamental myths organize the conceptual scheme of the social life and of the outside world which surrounds it. Elaborate community rituals allow the individual by means of symbolic dances, songs, and ritual speech to participate physically in the expression of the group's conceptions of the absolute. (Warner, 1958; 10).

This quotation from Warner strikes me as a description of religion as an existential phenomenon, very much as Burridge has defined it. Keeping in mind that, through participation in the religion, one can then transcend it (having understood the source of the mystery), what then is the situation of woman, who, as I discussed to some extent in the last chapter, definitely does not participate so in such expression? If there is something going on which she does not know about — except that it is going on, and that it does affect her — then this is hardly a favourable position for an understanding of her social condition. To grow spiritually requires looking at oneself with a questioning frame of mind, and a willingness to change. This would be exceedingly difficult if the basis on which one's arbitrary social "self" was constituted could not be confronted outright. This is very clearly put by Warner:

The superordinate male group, made sacred through the ritual initiation of its individual members into the

sacred group, and maintained as a unit by continual participation in the rituals, subordinates the female group which is unified by virtue of exclusion from the ceremonies and of ritual uncleanness. The superordination of the male is made a mystery by the nexus of masculinity, sacredness, and the seasonal reproductive cycle. Within this mystery lies one of the strongest and most effective sanctions found in Murngin society. The male sacredness becomes more sacrosanct and holy as it progresses into the graded deeper mysteries through the age-graded initiations, and this sacredness controls the profane and less sacred elements of society by the invocation of the direct negative sanctions of ritual... (Warner, 1958:394).

Warner adds that the men are thereby subject to this control as well — yet it is they who enforce it. I would think, then, that there is an element of choice for them, which surely does not exist for the women.

While excluded from participation with the men, the women may be expected to contribute to the efficacy of the men's rites. The female kin of a boy being initiated may be obliged to observe food or speech taboos or to scar their own bodies (R. and C. Berndt, 1964:156). About initiation of boys in the Kimberley area, Kaberry writes: "The men and especially the mother's brother were particularly angry if the women did not dance well ..." (1939:80). I cannot see this kind of participation by women as implying that they are not totally excluded from the sacred... If they do not share in the core of religious life, they

do not share in it at all. The part they play is not for themselves, and is probably by that token more accurately described as a humiliation than a sharing.

Yet the men may be involved in the initiation of a girl, not in a complementary way, but in a manner which follows the pattern of ritual activities controlled by men for men. The girl is merely an object for their ends. R. and C. Berndt summarize the following example of the brutality and humiliation involved.

Roth (1897:174-80)^[6] describes various forms which a girl's initiation may take. In the Boulia district (Queensland) a pubescent girl is caught by a number of men; they forcibly enlarge the vaginal orifice by tearing it downward with their fingers, which have possum twine wound round them, then have sexual relations with her, collecting the semen and later drinking it ritually. ... After this she is permitted to wear a grass necklet and other decorations, and go to her husband (1964:151).

In discussing the matter of girls' initiation or puberty rituals throughout Australia, R. and C. Berndt state that these are never formalized social events involving the community as are male initiations, and that they lack "... the teaching of esoteric details directly relevant to sacred life" (1964:155). Kaberry speaks similarly of the Kimberley natives, and says that menstruation is followed soon by marriage (1939:97). I do not see the fact that a boy must prove himself ready for marriage, in

contrast to a girl, as implying that the girl is highly valued. Or rather I do; but, as I mentioned previously, her value is largely a political and economic one as defined by men. Her loss by her own patrilineal group is compensated by gifts from her husband to them.

When she is married, she is no longer living in her own horde country. Patrilocal residence and woman's exclusion from ritual knowledge and practice are different aspects of the same social scheme:

...the particular myths and ceremonies are unique and completely specialist, in so far as a man's lineage binds him to sacred sites in a particular territory. ... increase ceremonies can only be carried out by members of the horde, or the old women who are wives of the headmen. The totemic corroborees can only be performed by members of the horde (Kaberry, 1939:138). 7

As part of her argument that women are to some extent sacred, Kaberry says that they possess many of the totems which men possess. Yet she says that although women have cult totems, which are associated with hordes and certain corroborees performed at initiation ceremonies, they do not participate in, or even witness, these corroborees. There is an interesting parallel between this and those myths which tell of woman once possessing the sacred objects, which Kaberry points out (1939:201). In reality as well as myth, women are not in a position to wield the

sacred totemic powers associated with the horde country of their birth.

As was already indicated to some extent in the quotation from Warner on the "superordination of the male", the exclusive religious heritage of men gives them political power over women. Kaberry says that the women cannot, unlike the men, assemble the hordes for their own corroborees (activities which I will discuss shortly), mete out punishment, go to war, conduct proceedings at horde gatherings, etc. (1939:179). She continues:

It is doubtful if the women were conscious of their political subordination as a disadvantage. I never encountered any suffragettes, potential or militant; possibly they were not needed apart from the desirability of a little more publicity for feminine pursuits. Certainly it did not undermine their status and the rights they enjoyed in other spheres (1939:180).

Which is quite a flippant way to treat such an issue. (I would criticize this statement in the same way as I did White's suggestion that women accept their junior status: they have no choice in the matter.) Why are there separate "feminine pursuits" in the first place? Women have some of their own myths (1939:202) as well as their own ceremonies, which are kept secret from the men. In one instance Kaberry describes women as curious but not jealous about male rites (1939:201-2), yet she says of the six women's corroborees

she witnessed that, in all of them, the women left camp proud of having men at a disadvantage (1939:260).

Anyway, as A. P. Elkin points out in his introduction to Aboriginal Woman, women's corroborees "... are not Dream Time [i.e., part of the mythic tradition which sanctions the social system], but are collective rites for love magic, derived ultimately from the dead "(1939:xxix). And White (who did field-work in South Australia) says:

From my personal observation and from the literature I am sure that even the women consider their ceremonies less important to the whole society than the men's. The attitude of both sexes is that women perform ceremonies for purposes that concern women, whereas men's ceremonies concern the whole society (1970:23).

Elkin, again, continues:

We must remember that women may be independent, powerful, and spiritual, and yet be profane, or outside of that sphere of sacred belief and ritual, admission to which is by religious initiation (1939: xxx).

While I basically agree with this statement in itself, I do not think women are powerful in the situation it refers to. And I think that "spiritual" should refer more exactly to that potential for growth in every person: although such growth may be possible here, it would very likely not be an untrammelled individual expression in a society where women

do not seem to be regarded as people to the extent that men are. (I have discussed this problem in Chapter 3, section (i).) Rather, it would likely be defined with respect to, and in opposition to, the freedom of men. As Warner writes of the Djungguan ceremony:

Sometimes an old woman ... goes through the camp snatching the men's spears from them and threatening the younger women with the weapons. She is taking a three-fold rôle in this ritual act: (1) expressing the antagonism of the women's division of the sex and age structure toward the men's division; (2) disciplining the younger women and thereby increasing the solidarity of the women's division; (3) acting the part of a very old woman, which gives her special privileges, since old women are "more like a man".... (Warner, 1958:292).

Kaberry says women have a profane attitude to men, and therefore the men aren't more sacred (1939:230).

Elkin says this reads too much into "sacred":

The point is that the men are not priests, or holy persons as distinct from the women, but are members of a secret society of a religious character, and ... it is just "men's business" (1939:xxx).

Yet I think we must consider the fact, as Kaberry appears to me to be reluctant to do, that men's business is women's business whether they like it or not: it affects women, but women have no say in it. Or if they do, it is by indirect influence; and however effective this may be, the fact that

such tactics are necessary constitutes an oppression. Men's business happens to be what Aboriginal society is based upon. Men's control of women is usually explicit and direct.

This is probably why, in Australia generally, "...men do not appear to react to menstruation with disgust or horror; nor are women labelled 'unclean' at this time... (R. and C. Berndt, 1964:154-5). Mary Douglas suggests (referring to the Walbiri of Central Australia):

When male dominance is accepted as a central principle of social organization and applied without inhibition and with full rights of physical coercion, beliefs in sex pollution are not likely to be highly developed (1966:168-69).

However energetically they may try to seduce one another's wives the men are in perfect accord on one point. They are agreed that they should never allow their sexual desires to give an individual woman bargaining power or scope for intrigue (1966:168).

The psychological constraints of pollution beliefs are therefore unnecessary, as the system buttresses itself explicitly.

(iv) Technology, Economic Functions, and the Position of Women

Although I suggested earlier (Chapter 3, section (iii)(a)) that in applying de Beauvoir's ideas it is advisable to see the relation of people to nature as mediated by symbols as well as by manual tools, Warner suggests a possible correlation between the sexual division of technological and economic functions and the exclusion of women from religious knowledge and activities, which I think deserves consideration.

The Murngin man handles more complicated tools and weapons, and uses more complex techniques in making and using them than does his female kinswoman; it is one of the theses of this book that a man's social value is correspondingly more important, and his place in rituals is partly due to and partly expresses this fact (1958:6).

The ultimate in such activities is the hunting of turtles, which also involves making harpoons and canoes, and sailing (1958:134). Warner does not suggest that women are restricted regarding participation in these pursuits because they are innately less able to do so efficiently. Kaberry, however, says that men hunt because they are faster and have greater powers of endurance (1939:14). I have dealt with these arguments in the second chapter. If women have less endurance, it is not innate, but the result of different training, which centres around the expectation that they will have children — one cannot take

a child on the hunt, which Judith Brown points to as the crux of the matter.

Warner says it is impossible to tell whether the technological situation is the cause of the religious one, or vice-versa (1958:134). I suggest that they are both reflections, in the realm of social organization, of the fact that only women bear children.

FOOTNOTES

1 Given what seems to me a frequently occurring popular misconception, I feel I should mention the following: the fact that a society is matrilineal does not mean it is matriarchal; though descent may be reckoned through the mother, power still rests in the hands of males. There are no known matriarchal societies. In matrilineal as well as patrilineal societies, women can be objects for men.

2 A similar view of women in Hindu civilization is discussed in Chapter 5.

3 For a summary of spirit-children beliefs throughout Australia, see R. and C. Berndt (1964:120ff.).

4 Ashley-Montagu, M.F., Coming Into Being Among the Australian Aborigines (London: Routledge, 1937), p.111; "Ignorance of Physiological Paternity in Secular Knowledge and Orthodox Belief among the Australian Aborigines", Oceania, Vol.XI, No.1, p.111.

5 Kaberry is referring to W.E.H. Stanner, "The Daly River Tribes — A Report of Field-work in North Australia", Oceania, Vol.IV, p.17.

6 W.E. Roth, Ethnological Studies Among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines (Brisbane: Government Printer, 1897), pp.174-80.

7 R. and C. Berndt (1964:120) say "corroboree" is a white Australian word referring generally to social gatherings on a large scale, and that it confuses sacred and non-sacred events. Kaberry (1939:6) says it is an Aboriginal term for a dance. In the instance referred to here, it appears she means that this is a sacred ritual.

CHAPTER 5

THE KAMA SUTRA

(i) Introduction

The Kama Sutra, meaning "aphorisms on love", was written in India by Vatsyayana sometime between the first and the fourth centuries A.D..¹ The author was to a great extent compiling material from previous works on the subject by various authors in the Hindu tradition.²

I will be showing in this chapter that the Kama Sutra is a male-oriented work. It appears to be concerned with the happiness of women only insofar as this makes it easier for men to indulge themselves. It advocates the double standard and relegates wives to the position of housewives whose main purpose is to serve their husbands. The sexual relationships it describes are for the most part between men and lovers other than their wives. I will also be discussing the oppressive significance, for women and men, of

the fact that all relationships are predetermined as to who and what is involved.

The Kama Sutra was first translated into English by Sir Richard Burton and F. F. Arbuthnot in 1883. While it provides valuable insights into Hindu culture, it reflects at the same time the mentality of its translators. "To Arbuthnot it may have seemed important less as a clue to Indian culture than as a tract for the times, a manual for Victorian husbands."³ And I think the same applies to its popularity in our society today: it is, to my mind, much like Playboy in a different cultural context; and it is addressed to the same kind of social person, the man about town. "The ideal life that Vatsyayana visualized was that of a nagarika, or a city dweller" ⁴

Hindu society at the time of writing of the Kama Sutra was a prosperous mercantile one. Vatsyayana prescribes for men the acquisition of wealth and the pursuit of leisurely affairs, including parties and entertainment. This would not be possible in Australian Aboriginal society. However, I think it would have been impossible in Hindu society as well if it were not for the fact that such dalliance was proscribed for women. The women maintained the society, as de Beauvoir would put it, not just by bearing and rearing children, but by taking care of those daily household activities which make the pursuit of leisure feasible for

men. Interestingly though, we have seen that in Australia too the women maintain — for example they prepare the food while the men participate in ceremonies. This is so even though these activities of Australian men lack the material indulgence of those of the nagarika. The kinds of male activities being referred to in the two societies are of a somewhat different order. The similarity in the two of woman's position, in spite of this difference, makes her maintenance role in human society that much clearer.

Many of us who are not familiar with Eastern culture have at least heard of the Kama Sutra; and those who have read it are likely, I think, to insist that it is not a pornographic work, but rather that it is ultimately religious in its orientation. The author himself states that religious pursuits are better than material ones, which are in turn better than physical ones (1963:66).

I think the distinction between "religious" and "spiritual" is crucial here. The terms are loosely interchanged in common practice. To say that something is basically or ultimately religious implies that it is all right morally: but, as I have discussed, religion is relative and arbitrary; and therefore, as its morality is pretended to be absolute, it is quite at odds with spirituality — with the individual's search for fulfillment in awareness. It may be argued that Vatsyayana does not say specifically that what is religious is spiritual, that any time he uses the word "should" he is

not implying or expressing a morality higher than his religious context. I would have to agree with this. But the whole point of my examination of the Kama Sutra, and of this thesis altogether, is that the question of morality must be raised, which is begun by making the distinction discussed above.

The worst side of cultural relativism is its acceptance of our inhumanity, our failures to become what we could be. Our weakness in shirking individual responsibility is made acceptable, and ceases to be seen as weakness, by seeing ourselves solely as products of our culture. Instead we speak of social responsibility, and often thereby end up buttressing the very structures which keep us from being strong. That we are products of our culture is true, but it is a limited truth: relativity is accepted as absolute by refusing to ask questions on a higher level. I have criticized anthropologists who implicitly take sexism in other cultures to justify its existence in their own, and I think that many western readers of the Kama Sutra are, in this sense, lay anthropologists.

I mentioned that the Kama Sutra was similar to Playboy. It is true that Playboy readers would hardly proclaim their sexual interest here to be ultimately religious, let alone spiritual. There is criticism of religious institutions in Playboy. But these are not what constitutes religion in

our society, except insofar as both they and capitalism rest on the Protestant ethic. Again, I am using Burridge's idea of religion given in the introductory chapter. In this light the religion of Playboy involves a male-sexist materialism, a reflection of the values of our culture. But so as not to be too blatant about this level of interest this magazine professes to a concern with social responsibility, which is part of our actual religious tradition: it speaks out for various social reforms within the system, in a "liberal" superficial manner.

Actually, I do not see the Kama Sutra as pornographic: it contains little description of sexual matters of a physical nature, whether or not this is meant to titillate our desires. Yet insofar as it advocates relations between people based on a denial of the totality of the individual — for example, physical appearance as a criterion for marriageability (1963:126) — I consider it an obscene book. Things which we usually call "obscene" threaten in some way the structure of our experience. The Kama Sutra is obscene in that it contributes to the fragmentation of experience which makes such reactions possible: they even occur within the context of the book itself (see section (iv) of this chapter).

(ii) Sex Roles: Wives and Lovers

The Hindu conception of a full life postulates the harmony of three activities: Dharma, Artha and Kama. Dharma meant, in this connection, a life of religious obligation, Artha, social welfare (economic and political activity) and Kama, the life of the senses. Each of these is to have its legitimate place, though the life of righteousness has always been accorded primacy. But it was emphasized that neither Artha nor Kama was to be neglected by the normal man.⁵

It seems that "man" here means, specifically, "males":

The Hindu conception of a wife is one with whom Dharma is practiced. The results of union, Vatsyayana says, are the acquisition of Dharma and Artha, offspring, affinity, increase of friends and untarnished love.⁶

Kama, then, is pursued outside of marriage. That it is not a primary concern of a wife is clear from the qualifications in the following:

Even young maids should study the Kama Sutra along with its arts and sciences before marriage and after it they should continue to do so with the consent of their husbands (Vatsyayana, 1963:70).

Regarding women with whom Kama may be practiced, Vatsyayana says:

When Kama is practised by men of the four castes according to the rules of the Holy Writ (i.e. by lawful marriage) with virgins of their own caste, it then becomes a means of acquiring lawful progeny and good fame... . On the contrary the practice of Kama with women of the higher castes, and with those previously enjoyed by others, even though they be of the same caste, is prohibited. But the practice of Kama with women of the lower castes, with women excommunicated from their own caste, with public women, and with women twice married [i.e., who have left their husbands] is neither enjoined nor prohibited. The object of practising Kama with such women is pleasure only (1963:81).

It seems that wives acquire Kama as a sort of reward for being a good wife according to the ideal:

The wife ... should lead a chaste life, devoted to her husband, and doing everything for his welfare. Women acting thus acquire Dharma, Artha, and Kama, obtain a high position, and generally keep their husbands devoted to them (1963:146).

For the husband, on the other hand, the pursuit of Kama is an active affair, which takes him outside his marriage. According to Jeannine Auboyer, in her Daily Life in Ancient India (1965), adultery could be severely punished (1965:59), and affairs with courtesans were considered adulterous for a married man (1965:241). He therefore had to conduct these with the greatest secrecy, and the most careful lies to his wife (as Vatsyayana cautions the nagarika). Yet for the

"man of the world", the courtesan was the "main object of Indian eroticism" (Meyer, 1930:215). High class courtesans were greatly respected (Auboyer, 1965:237).

In some respects the position of courtesans was better than that of wives:

They accompanied men to public places,
took part in sports and amusements.⁷
They were also much better educated.

But for a courtesan too, it is still a man's world:

A public woman endowed with a good disposition, beauty and other winning qualities, and also versed in the above arts, obtains the name of a Ganika, or public woman of high quality, and receives a seat of honour in an assemblage of men (Vatsyayana, 1963:73).

Of course, the most basic material comforts of a courtesan depend upon how much she can please men in their pursuit of Kama. A woman who has left her husband is also dependent upon men for her welfare, certainly if she wants to keep up her former material standards.

There is another category of women who may be "resorted to", as it is commonly put in the text, for special reasons, that is, not from desire alone. This category is the wives of other men of respectability. The following two examples are included in the list of possibilities:

- 1) The husband of this woman has violated the chastity of my wives, I shall

therefore return the injury by seducing his wives (1963:83).

- 2) By the help of this woman I shall kill an enemy of the king, who has taken shelter with her, and whom I am ordered by the king to destroy (1963:83).

This is really not far from the Australian and BaMbuti situations discussed earlier where women are essentially objects mediating relations between men. This position of women can also be seen in the fact that a man should not practice Kama with a woman of a higher caste. A man having relations with a higher caste woman would be infringing upon the territory of his male superiors. Of course, the fact that there are castes at all makes objects of everyone, regardless of sex.

To return to the subject of wives:

A virtuous woman, who has affection for her husband, should act in conformity with his wishes as if he were a divine being, and with his consent should take upon herself the whole care of the family. She should keep the whole house well cleaned (Vatsyayana, 1963:143).

And further:

... without his consent she should not either give or accept invitations, or attend marriages and sacrifices... (1963:149).

Yet in his introduction to the Kama Sutra, K. M. Panikkar says woman's relationship to her husband is not one of

inferiority. As to how he thinks of inferiority, I honestly cannot imagine, given the abovementioned prescriptions and proscriptions regarding her conduct. Perhaps what he says shortly afterwards is a clue to his mind on the matter, but it is no more of an explanation or justification for the situation than is Kaberry's idea that Australian women are not so badly off, because they share their fate with European ones. Panikkar says:

These and similar functions may perhaps be unsuited to a society based on the absolute equality of men and women, but in the normal conditions where man is the breadwinner and the head of the family, these injunctions seem to be more than useful for the development of harmonious conjugal relations (1963:38).

Vatsyayana says that if a woman is childless, "... she herself should tell her husband to marry another woman" (1963:147). And of a woman in a polygynous household he says:

If her husband happens to quarrel with any of his other wives, she should reconcile them to each other, and if he desires to see any woman secretly, she should manage to bring about the meeting between them (1963:150).

That bit of advice is specifically meant for a woman who finds herself disliked by her husband. The way for her to attempt regaining his favour is to help him ignore her. The inner harmony of a wife is somehow not a matter for

consideration in "the development of harmonious conjugal relations".

In the presence of the sacred Fire the husband promised his wife that he would never forsake her in his pursuit of pleasure, wealth and spirituality. Our complaint is that the delinquents who violated this vow were not severely dealt with by society. It tolerated polygamy; it did not for a long time give any proprietary rights to the widow [and when it did all over the country by 1200 A.D. the position of women in other respects was still getting worse, as it had been doing steadily since about 500 B.C. (Altekar, 1962: 343-54)]; later on when renunciation of worldly life became popular [by the beginning of the Christian era (1962: 350-51)] it did not condemn those persons who used to desert their wives in pursuit of their spiritual ideals (Altekar, 1962: 104).

Furthermore, the motives behind polygamy seem similar to those given in Vatsyayana's discussion of women who may be resorted to for special purposes. It was not as if a new wife was taken out of love, though even if she were it would not excuse the rejection of another wife. Such ulterior motives make it impossible to relate with another person as someone equal to oneself:

... polygamy often prevailed among the rich and ruling sections of society. It was fairly common among kings and nobles, who often found it a useful instrument in strengthening their political power by contracting numerous but judicious matrimonial alliances. The rich probably

regarded plurality of wives as a proof of their wealth, reputation and social position (1962:104).

But Altekar adds that the main reason for polygamy was to ensure the birth of sons, whose performance of rites for the ancestors was necessary to send one to heaven (1962:105).

While the situation of a wife in Hindu civilization around the time of Vatsyayana hardly seems a fulfilling way to live, there was virtually no choice for a girl or woman in the matter :

At the centre point of this intimate family life is the mother, covered with much glory by Indian literature; ... to the Hindu it is just this side of a woman's life that is the beginning and the end (Meyer, 1930:199).

Altekar says that marriage has been a social and religious duty since the earliest times (1962:31-32); and Auboyer describes it as a sacrament. She adds:

[Girls] were brought up to believe that a woman was only fulfilled in motherhood, trained to show respect and obedience toward their father and husband, assured that their parents only wanted to see them happy ... (Auboyer, 1965:178).

And there is a story in the Mahabharata epic (c.125 A.D.) of a woman near death who, learning that she could not go to heaven because she had never married, spent a night with a man so she could escape that fate (Meyer, 1930:146).

By 300 B. C. marriage was obligatory for girls, which Altekar attributes partly to the fact that of the many girls who joined the Buddhist and Jain orders, a lot lapsed from their spiritual pursuits (1962:32-33). As I discuss in the next chapter, the Buddhist order treated nuns in a harsher manner than it did monks. Perhaps this explains the fact that many women left it.

According to Altekar, child marriage had become the standard by the beginning of the Christian era. (From a reading of the Kama Sutra, it would appear that either this estimation is too early a date, or else the suggested date of the Kama Sutra should be pushed back to or beyond 100 A.D.) This had the very important effect of allowing no time for the education of girls: they no longer even learned the Vedic prayers recited daily in the household.

Even the initiation ritual (upanayana samskara) so necessary for endowing woman with the proper Aryan status, was first reduced to a mere formality and then dropped out altogether (Altekar, 1962:16).

Marriage itself became a substitute for the initiation ritual for girls.

The prohibition of upanayana amounted to a spiritual disenfranchisement of women and produced a disastrous effect upon their general position in society. It reduced them to the status of Sudras [the lowest caste] (1962:204).

As for the matter of divorce, while it was permitted up to the Christian era in certain circumstances (such as insanity, impotence, or disease), from about 200 A.D. it began to be denied to a wife even if left by her husband (Altekar:1962:83-84). While the Kama Sutra was probably written at about that time, it would seem that, whatever the various dates, it was still possible for a woman to leave her husband, as Vatsyayana refers to women in such circumstances. But generally, at the time of the Kama Sutra, the situation of women was one of being caught in a process of increasing oppression.

Widow re-marriage became increasingly frowned on from 300 B.C. to 200 A.D. (Altekar, 1962:152). Altekar describes the ascetic ideal prescribed for a widow:

If she continued to live in the family of her husband, she had to work as a drudge; if she lived separately, she was given a pittance as her maintenance. She had to spend her life with her head shaven and arms bared; she was an out-caste on festive occasions, — a bad omen, her very sight being regarded as most inauspicious (1962:164).

While it was possible for her to form an informal alliance with a man, the fact that this was looked down upon would hardly have helped her in her plight — Vatsyayana describes such a woman as a "widow in poor circumstances, or of a weak nature" (1963:149). No doubt the prevalence of this attitude could be used to oppress her further, perhaps even

by the man with whom she was living.

As a final comment on this situation, it seems that the very fact of being born female made one an unwanted person (Meyer, 1930:7-8). A daughter could not at this time perform the rites to ensure her parents a place in heaven, and the best to be hoped for was a decent marriage for her. But with increasing caste restrictions on marriage, and pressure against widow re-marriage, the choices were quite restricted (Altekar, 1962:4).

In his review of the period from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D., Altekar says:

... marriage became an irrevocable union, irrevocable, however, only so far as the wife was concerned. The husband could discard his wife for the grave offence of not being sufficiently submissive. The wife however could not take a similar step and marry a second time, even if her husband had taken to vicious ways and completely abandoned her. This differential treatment was due to the simple fact that women were no longer able to effectively oppose these absurd theories and claims, most of them being uneducated and quite ignorant of their former status and privileges (1962:349).

While that may seem to be a somewhat simplistic conclusion, I do not doubt that it is still very much to the point. The situation is analogous in my mind to that of Australian women, who are excluded from a knowledge of the very rationale for their exclusion. In such circumstances it is a feat to come to understand that the situation one is

in does not derive from "the way things are". I think people are likely to blame themselves in a situation where it cannot be seen that others have created the pain in not allowing them to be responsible for their own lives. It is only when able to take life into one's own hands that blaming oneself becomes proper, however, if we are thinking in terms of spirituality. (Perhaps it then also becomes rarer at difficult points along the way.)

(iii) Sex Roles: Myth and Mystification of Sexuality

Panikkar says that in the Hindu view the world was created through the union of matter (male) and energy (female), and that sexual intercourse is like a ritual re-enactment of this creation.

The Hindu view of salvation being that of the union of the individual soul with the universal, the utter merging of one in the other, the union of man and woman in which the duality is lost becomes in the Hindu view the perfect symbol of liberation (1963:20-21).

This is considered to be a sacred sacrifice: "From this offering springs forth the child" (1963:21). But may not this itself be felt by the woman to be another sacrifice, rather than a gift received in return for one, considering that she has virtually no choice in assuming the subordinate

role of wife and mother? There really does not seem to be any union in which duality is lost. Rather, woman's role as childbearer is perhaps a rationalization that she has just as much importance in life as man: maybe this is why Panikkar feels there is no inequality. But however revered a woman may have been as a mother (Altekar 1962:100), this does not necessarily imply respect for her as a person, just as the existence of a mother goddess may go together with the actual oppression of women. There is, in fact, great inequality. Not only is the woman not compensated for her sacrifice: she is expected to do all the housework and relate to her husband as if he is divine. If there is any feeling of union, it must be fleeting, and it therefore doesn't amount to much as a spiritual realization. Like the BaMbuti molimo ritual around the sacred fire, it affects nothing in the world of actions.

The ideas expressed in the Kama Sutra about the nature of the sexuality of women and men are similar to those in our own culture; and in both cultures, the ideas reflect and help perpetuate the social situation.

Now some may ask here: If men and women are beings of the same kind, and are engaged in bringing about the same results, why should they have different works to do?

Vatsya says that this is so, because the ways of working as well as the consciousness of pleasure in men and women are different. The difference in the ways of working, by which men are

the actors, and women are the persons acted upon, is owing to the nature of the male and the female, otherwise the actor would be sometimes the person acted upon, and vice-versa. And from this difference in the ways of working follows the difference in the consciousness of pleasure, for a man thinks, "this woman is united with me", and a woman thinks, "I am united with this man" (Vatsyayana, 1963:90).

I have asked the question posed here by Vatsyayana, and this certainly does not answer me. It strikes me as being akin to much of social science, in that it points to the results of practice as the causes of practice and thereby justifies the practice as being in conformity with said causes or givens. All of Vatsyayana's prescriptions for men essentially rest on this assumption that women are passive creatures: if they do not behave passively, they simply are not being proper women. This is, by the way, the same as Sigmund Freud's view of women (— see footnote 4, Chapter 3).

The process of the mystification of female sexuality becomes outrageously clear in juxtaposing the two following bits of advice to women from the Kama Sutra with the third quotation on the difficulty of understanding women:

... old authors say that although a girl loves the man ever so much, she should not offer herself, or make the first overtures, for a girl who does loses her dignity, and is liable to be scorned and rejected. But when the man shows his wish to enjoy her, she should be favourable to him and

should show no change in her demeanor when he embraces her, and should receive all the manifestations of his love as if she were ignorant of the state of his mind (1963:138).

And:

... even though she be invited by any man to join him, she should not at once consent to a union, because men are apt to despise things which are easily acquired (1963:186).

The result, which passes for a mystery to its creators:

The extent of the love of women is not known, even to those who are the objects of their affection, on account of its subtlety, and on account of the avarice and natural intelligence of womankind (1963:191).

It is probably as a result of his inability to understand the "subtle" ways of women, which he himself encourages, that Vatsyayana is able to have the gall to say the following:

Moreover, [the wife] should not be a scold, for says Gonardiya, "there is no cause of dislike on the part of a husband so great as this characteristic in a wife (1963:144).

This denies to a woman any spontaneous protest against her oppression, by the insidious technique of flatly refusing to accept that it might possibly be valid. And that she

herself might end up being convinced of this is not impossible, for she has no force on her side in what is essentially a power relationship. She can only lose, so she may be forced into accepting the situation and seeing it as favourably as she can. As R. D. Laing says in The Politics of Experience:

Exploitation must not be seen as such. It must be seen as benevolence. Persecution preferably should not need to be invalidated as the figment of a paranoid imagination, it should be experienced as kindness (1967:49).

But sometimes, if what a man offers does not get him what he wants, then oppression becomes overt. For instance, in advising about seducing a young girl, Vatsyayana says:

Under various pretences he should do all these things [to get her to come closer, etc.] He should also promise to be faithful (1963:130).

Now if she will not yield, he should threaten to spread gossip that she did in fact yield, which puts her in the bind of having to yield, because she is not desirable for marriage if not a virgin.

In this and other ways, as fear and confidence are created in the minds of children, so should the man gain her over to his wishes (1963:130).

As for virgins who got raped: "The only way in which the law writers could help them was by compelling the culprits to

marry the parties they had wronged" (Altekar, 1962:36).

Hardly the basis for a happy marriage.

Explaining love in The Dialectic of Sex, and referring to our own culture, Shulamith Firestone says that "women's 'clinging' behavior is necessitated by their objective social situation" (1971:135), a power situation in which their only gains come from giving up to a man. It seems to me that the same applies to a Hindu girl in the above-mentioned dilemma. Vatsyayana says,

In love the following circumstances are peculiar to the woman. She loves without regard to right or wrong, and does not try to gain over a man simply for the attainment of some particular purpose (1963:154).

Right or wrong here being social considerations as to what is proper; particular purpose being material considerations and the like. This is to say that women really love while men pretend to for ulterior motives, which, for Vatsyayana, is "right". After all, Artha must be considered; it is noteworthy that friends are lumped in along with such things as land and wealth, which a man should acquire, protect, and constantly increase in the pursuit of Artha (1963:65).

At times Vatsyayana says things of an apparently different order. He states that those marriages are most desirable which are based on mutual love (1963:142), and that a man who only comes to his wife when he wants does not

deserve to marry (1963:139). But the real motive comes through when he elaborates on this:

Of all the lovers of a girl, he only is her true husband who possesses qualities that are liked by her, and such a husband only enjoys real superiority over her, because he is the husband of love (1963:139).

(iv) The Structuring and Destruction of Experience

The preceding discussion in this chapter has focused on the overall context of relations between men and women in Hindu civilization at the time of writing of the Kama Sutra, as described in the book itself and by various writers on Hindu society. It is clear that, judging from the Kama Sutra, there is little regard for what people are experiencing inside themselves — that relations between people are conditioned by ulterior motives, by doing what is socially correct rather than what comes from the heart. Some force others into these dilemmas. But all are hurt by it. As Laing says throughout The Politics of Experience, if our experience is destroyed, our behaviour will be destructive, destroying the experience of others, and so on. We cannot afford to accept cultural contexts as given.

This section focuses on the further destruction of experience within the context already discussed.

In seeking a wife,

... a man should fix his affections upon a girl who is of good family, whose parents are alive, and who is three or more years younger than himself. She should be born of a highly respectable family, possessed of wealth, well connected, and with many relations and friends. She should also be beautiful, of a good disposition, with lucky marks upon her body, and with good hair, nails, teeth, ears, eyes and breasts The man should, of course, also possess these qualities himself (1963:125).

Vatsyayana advises the parents of a marriageable girl to "show her to advantage in society, because she is a kind of merchandise" (1963:127). (This speaks for itself.) Deceit is encouraged on the part of the suitor and his friends in convincing the girl's parents and disparaging other suitors.

In contrast to the ideal girl, any with one of the following characteristics (among others listed) should not be married; one's with an ill-sounding name, turned-up nostril, male-like form, crooked thighs; or any who are not virgins, etc. (1963:126). About the plight of a deformed or diseased girl, Altekar says:

She could not naturally get a good husband and her father had yet to

marry her. He had therefore to spend heavily in marrying her to a person, who was almost certain to discard her, and contract a fresh marriage with a more suitable bride. It must however be added that even if a defective girl is kept unmarried, her lot is by no means happy. As the years roll on and the parents die, her brothers do not care for her, and scoundrels and selfish persons in society are not few in number who delight in spreading thorns in her way (1962:34).

There are also restrictions on relations with lovers other than spouses, where physical or social distinctions having nothing to do with inner experience determine relationships. For instance, very white or black women should not be enjoyed by men. Nor, in a flagrant expression of the double standard, should "a woman who publicly expresses her desire for sexual intercourse" (1963:84).

Even what transpires in acts of love themselves is conditioned from outside the moment:

Congress between a man and a female water-carrier, or a female servant of a caste lower than his own, lasting only until the desire is satisfied, is called "congress like that of eunuchs". Here external touches, kisses, and manipulation are not to be employed (1963:121-22).

At one point Vatsyayana says that "anything may take place at any time, for love does not care for place or order " (1963:96). But further on he even tells what kinds of

sounds a woman should make in response to different kinds of pain caused by various ways of being struck by her lover (1963:110). Pain is inflicted to keep passion to a point of moderation during intercourse (1963:35). There are, then, hardly any further controls which could conceivably be placed on spontaneous experience. It is even told how a woman should proceed in her quarrelling if her lover mentions another's name(1963:122).

It is advised that after love-making, the couple should look at the stars((1963:121). Can stars be beautiful when observation of them is a matter of "should"?

FOOTNOTES

- 1 K.M. Panikkar in the Introduction to Vatsyayana, 1963, p.22.
- 2 Panikkar, 1963, p. 24.
- 3 W.G. Archer in the Preface to Vatsyayana, 1963, p.14.
- 4 Panikkar, 1963, p.31.
- 5 Panikkar, 1963, p.20.
- 6 Panikkar, 1963, p.36.
- 7 Panikkar, 1963, p.35.

CHAPTER 6

ENLIGHTENMENT, LIBERATION AND SEXISM

"Enlightenment" is a relative word. To my mind, it implies liberation from all of the ways in which culture limits our perception of ourselves, each other and the world; and it entails acting accordingly. In speaking of spirituality, this is the minimal meaning I understand in using the word "enlightenment". Someone who has attained that state would not deny to others the possibility of similar growth. Travelling one's own path is the essence of a spiritual life.

Most of this chapter is concerned with a discussion of Buddhism. I mentioned in the introductory chapter that a religion which was not inimical to spirituality was conceivable. The only assumption of such a religion to be taken on faith would be that each person had their own path to travel according to their own choices, provided these choices

did not restrict those of others. Is Buddhism such a religion? Buddha was concerned with the attainment of enlightenment. I will be discussing whether the enlightenment he had in mind was a spiritual state.

To begin with, Buddhism is a religion in the sense of the definition I have been following. It is certainly concerned with the redemptive process — liberation from suffering; it involves assumptions about power — suffering is created by desire; it includes methods for attaining a state whereby one can perceive these truths. But Buddhism is spiritual insofar as it emphasizes that individuals can only come to perceive truth through their own experience — it is not to be taken on faith. The assumptions about power, for instance, are pertinent to the moral order only as a means of understanding and transcending that order, hardly as a rationale for it: the world is an illusion.

If Buddhism is thus a spiritual religion, it is a rare phenomenon in this world, where religion generally serves to uphold the particular and arbitrary "truths", i.e., lies, on which basis a society functions. When this religion of the usual kind changes, it does so only to accommodate itself to pressures at its weakpoints with as little alteration as possible. I am aware that perhaps it does not make any sense, then, to speak of a spiritual religion, inasmuch as religion is part of a social order. My one quarrel, and a

fundamental one, with the definition of religion I have been following in this thesis, is with what I take to be the implication that one can only become free of social obligations by fulfilling those obligations, that this is the only way of transcending them. That to me precludes the possibility of a spiritual life.

At any rate, there is a problem that can arise in the context of "religions" which profess to be concerned with enlightenment and the alleviation of human suffering. Although they are spiritually oriented in terms of major principles, these principles may not be applied in practice. A religion which espouses the search for enlightenment, and yet makes that search more difficult for a whole body of sufferers, is hardly spiritual. Its liberation is a sham.

Now, it appears that Buddha had a sexist bias which resulted in the kind of oppression mentioned above:

The founders and leaders of both these movements [Buddhism and Jainism] shared the indifference to, or contempt of women, which is almost universal among the advocates of the ascetic ideal. The Buddha was reluctant to admit women to his Church, and the Digambara Jains hold that women can never get salvation except by first being reborn as men. ...

Owing to the pressing entreaties of his foster mother, the Buddha eventually decided with great reluctance to admit nuns into his Church. Mahavira [the founder of Jainism] is not known to have raised any objection in the matter. But both Buddhism and Jainism placed nuns under a more rigorous discipline than

monks. ... Thus the admission of a new nun was to be sanctioned by a joint meeting of the monks and nuns; new monks, however, could be admitted without consulting the nuns at all. ... The climax is, however, reached by the rule which lays it down that a nun, though 100 years old, must stand in reverence before a monk, though he may have just been initiated in the Church. The reader will not now be surprised to learn that a nun could never preach before a congregation of monks, though the selected ones among the latter could preach before a congregation of nuns (Altekar, 1962:208).

In Women Under Primitive Buddhism, I. B. Horner discusses Buddha's reluctance to admit women into the order. She says of Buddha: "... Gotama never hinted that woman has not the same chance as man or was in any way unfitted by her nature to attain nirvana" (1930:103-4). She attributes his hesitation to three possibilities: first,

... an appearance due perhaps to the hand of the monk editors of the texts (1930:109);

secondly,

... it is possible that he held back, if he did, on account of his already biassed, though not culpably prejudiced, view of women. He was born a Hindu, and ancestry, traditions and education cannot be shaken off simply by the desire to be quit of them (1930:109);

finally, Buddha apparently believed that the admission of women would lessen the lifetime of the Order (1930:105;111).

This third point is perhaps related to the second one. There is a suggestion of a deep-seated bias:

An allusion to the wife as foot-minister, a symbol of the most utter humility, makes it clear that her prestige was kept in check; and it appears from Gotama's reputed saying, "Best among wives is she that best ministers," that the old notions of one-sided service and respect were still in the ascendent. ... the relentless bonds of matrimony chained the woman faster than the man. Because of their heavier demands on her, they laid greater chances for failure at her door; but they also gave her the opportunity for supreme abnegation, magnanimity and tenderness (1930:43).

Horner suggests that Buddha wondered if the call of motherhood would prove irresistible to women: if they were to leave the Order on this account, it would not survive, as the vows of the Order required a life that was to be "celibate and totally unencumbered" (1930:110-11).

There is a curious mixture of attitudes in the above suggestion and the quotations which precede it. While Buddha may have considered women to be equal to men in the ability to attain nirvana, perhaps he felt female and male nature to be different — on account of the call of motherhood, which he apparently imagined to be innate — and thus to require different paths. I would say, of course, that whatever psychological characteristics may have been common among women at this time (sixth century, B.C.), would have been the product of cultural conditioning, and that this

should have been seen by one who was enlightened. But perhaps even if it was seen, Buddha felt these characteristics nonetheless existed as a social reality and had therefore to be transcended in a particular way. Feeling the call of motherhood to be directly opposed to the non-attachment required in the Order, he might have thus decided on a harsher discipline for women. Horner discusses the Eight Chief Rules of the Order (1930:119-20), which include the deferential treatment to be accorded monks by nuns as mentioned by Altekar. Now this does not strike me as a suitable way of countering the effects of a woman's previous condition outside the Order, but rather as a reinforcement of that condition. And interestingly, it was apparently thought that said condition had its merits, giving woman the "opportunity for supreme abnegation, magnanimity and tenderness" (1930:43). I have discussed in Chapter 3, section (i) why I do not feel such a situation would be conducive to spiritual growth.

But this is still to presuppose that all women — laywomen and almswomen in the Order alike — would feel the call of motherhood. That is a very oppressive judgment: it treats a social fact as an existential one, and sees women as members of a group rather than as authentic persons.

Buddha, then, if he could not deny the search for enlightenment to women, was apparently determined to make

it more difficult, thus adding suffering where he claimed to be concerned with becoming free of it. Perhaps the following, from Erich Neumann's The Great Mother, is somewhat of an explanation for the possible state of mind behind such a contradiction:

The Tibetans ... regard the demon of the ~~cosmic~~ the cosmic wheel as a woman, the witch Srinmo. This is due in part to the antifeminine influence of Buddhism, which, because woman creates new life, looks upon her as the chief obstacle to redemption, as an instrument of the passion beneath which the world moans. 1

This is very close to the view of woman as Eve, as the source of pain. Both completely overlook man's part. Man has been equally necessary and responsible for the creation of new life. Yet it is woman who bears the burden, and becomes identified as its source. This is again similar to the religious complex among the Australian Aborigines, where it appears that woman is seen as too close to nature itself to be entrusted with ensuring the survival of society in conflict with nature.

I conclude that Buddha related to people in a sexist manner. I cannot see that there is any point in speaking of him as enlightened, as he was not liberated from one of the basic dualities in human consciousness in human culture. Again, enlightenment is a relative word.

There is a similar situation in our own society. Many

so-called radicals appear to be conscious of the arbitrary and oppressive nature of our culture. Yet a lot of them have the same sexist attitudes towards women as do other men who ask no questions. They still see themselves as men — as opposed to women: they want those changes "out there", not seeing their view of themselves as part of the system that needs changing. If the culture is a male-created culture, then males can destroy it and re-create it, thinking themselves totally radical, without questioning the very basis from which they do all this, itself a cultural definition of sex roles. This kind of change is superficial. Although it may ameliorate the lot of some individuals, the basic lack of reciprocity in personal relations remains.

I agree with John Stuart Mill (1869:129-42) and Shulamith Firestone (1971:170 ff.) that the sexist power relationship is the prototypical power relationship in human society. A revolution which improves the material lot of people without eradicating sexism must result in a spiritual wasteland. This state of affairs in its turn would probably soon undo the material changes, as the cancer of power spreads anew. The liberation from sex roles is not something which is likely to follow other revolutionary change, once things settle down a bit. It must all be simultaneous, at least, in happening in society; and liberation from sexism in people's consciousness must precede social changes if it is going to become real in our relations with each other.

There is a book I will look at briefly here, because it expresses a meeting between some of the ideas I have been discussing while typically lacking a consciousness of the most important one. The book is called Be Here Now, itself a very spiritual suggestion. The author, Baba Ram Dass (formerly Richard Alpert, a Harvard psychology professor), took a lot of LSD and other psychedelics over a period of several years. He found that when he was high, he really knew: he transcended the cultural lies about who he was and what life was. But when the effects of the chemical wore off, it was as if he forgot the essence of that knowing. So he went to the East in search of someone who really knew, who was enlightened, in the hope that he could learn from such a person how to stay high. He eventually found his guru in India.

First, it strikes me that his guru is in some ways far more liberated than most people. He is apparently very much at peace with himself and others. He is sensitive to people to the point where he seems to be able to read their minds. And he wants to reflect back what he reads so that people can see themselves, understand, and grow. But the second point makes me wonder if his sensitivity is selective, no matter how intense it may be when it does happen.

The second point is this: Baba Ram Dass is male, his travelling companions on the spiritual quest were male, the

person who introduced him to the guru is male, the particular teacher the guru placed him with is male, and the guru is male. All the people surrounding the guru when Baba Ram Dass met him were male. Women are apparently peripheral in this community. For instance, they feed the guru. Judging from the photographs, they are almost always out of sight, or in the background when visible. Now whatever the situation may be in the society in the midst of which this community exists — which may make it harder for women to enter it in the first place — if it is a truly spiritual community, if its guru really knows, then the women who are in it would not be peripheral persons. Something is drastically lacking in the state of "enlightenment".

The third point is that, in the part of the book called "Cookbook for a Sacred Life", Baba Ram Dass expresses sexism — in a most "spiritual" way:

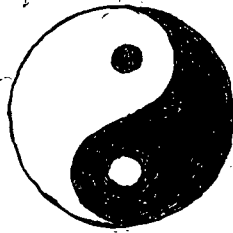
Let the man worship woman as God, the Holy Mother, the Divine Shakti, the Mana, the Food of Life, the Sustainer of Being, Isis, Astarte, the Good Earth, Terrible Kali, and Herself — All Of It. She is all of it.

Let the woman worship man as God, the Son, the Sun, the Father, the Lite of Her Life, the Creator, the Provider, as Jesus, as Ram, as Shiva, as Krishna, as all of them and Himself (1971:110-11).
[emphasis mine]

And:

For the woman where will be the heavy pull of the earth element (1971:111).

These are the same mythical images discussed by de Beauvoir that reflect the origins of our sexism, of our inability to relate to each other, one and all, as people: a discrimination much more far-reaching than race, involving splitting us in two even within ourselves. Where is the female in the male, the male in the female? The Yin-Yang symbol has it:



But that too can be a dangerous illusion: in the I Ching, the female is receptive, the male creative. In reality, however, creativity just is, receptivity just is. Let each of us choose our balance here without having to consider it a choice of varying degrees of female or male.

In concluding this chapter, it seems to me that it is possible for a person to become liberated from much of the arbitrariness of culture, and yet still be trapped by sexism. Consider how infinitely far one could go if freed from this illusion.

Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that

is purely feminine, I thought. ...Coleridge certainly did not mean, when he said that a great mind is androgynous, that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women... . Perhaps the androgynous mind is less apt to make these distinctions than the single-sexed mind. He meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided (Virginia Woolf, 1929:171).

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Quoted in Aphra, vol.3, no.1, pp.48-49.

CHAPTER 7

SEXUALITY AND SEXISM

(i) Towards a Truly Humanist (Non-sexist) Anthropology

... whether or not they be regarded as pawns in the marriage game which Levi-Strauss and other alliance theory enthusiasts insist men are always playing, there is no doubt that in many, if not most societies women are in fact treated as peripheral creatures. The peripherality of women in this sense is, irrespective of the system of descent followed, a general feature of all those societies in which men hold a secure monopoly of the major power positions and deny their partners effective jural equality. Here, of course, there is in one sense an obvious and vital contradiction since, whatever their legal position, women are equally essential to the perpetuation of life and of men. It is they who produce and rear children, and play a major part in their early training and education. Thus the treatment of women as peripheral persons denies, or

at least ignores, their fundamental bio-social importance and in social terms clashes with their deep commitment to a particular culture and society (Lewis 1970:87).

In the introduction, I spoke of sexuality as "... the biological differences between female and male and the real or assumed psychological differences dependent on these." In following chapters, I discussed the ability of only one sex to bear children as the only innate biological difference between the two. I looked at how culturally created psychological differences may develop as a consequence of the way in which a society deals with the one biological fact. And I examined religions — ~~which~~ manifested in myth, ritual and the morality underlying social activity; and in the case of the Kama Sutra through a religiously justified literary work — which reflect and rationalize this process of stereotyping personalities according to genital sexual characteristics.

I concluded that there are no innate psychological differences between the sexes. Women may very well have been, as Vatsyayana thought, more subtle than men on the average (he would probably leave out the last three words); but subtlety was necessary to deal with the deceitful tactics of men encouraged by the author of the Kama Sutra. Again, I do not feel, for example, that females are born more emotionally sensitive than males. Any psychological

differences that are more common to one sex than the other are the outcome of cultural conditioning.

I think this is probably the most controversial point I am making. It is also my most important one. If the reader should disagree, I would suggest at least that we will never discover whatever innate differences might conceivably exist until we have rid ourselves of the sexism responsible for the culturally created differences.

Sexist stereotyping — like all -isms and all typing, like all religions — is oppressive to the growth that is the essence of life. Whether or not one is physically oppressed as the result of a certain cultural classification, that classification is oppressive in a spiritual sense. Even if one can, in mind, transcend the sexism, one still has to put energy into dealing with the fact that others have not, and is forced to put less energy into finding who she or he really is. But I have discussed the paradox that without this experience of culture, it cannot be transcended. The point about sexism is that it denies to woman the possibility of sharing fully in the cultural experience — witness the exclusion of Aboriginal women from ritual participation and mythical knowledge — thus increasing the difficulty of transcendence and spiritual growth. Ironically and understandably, when this happens, what men may take to be their own transcendence and spiritual awareness is a sham as liberated

consciousness, as I discussed in the preceding chapter. Sexism precludes spirituality for the oppressed and the oppressor.

That liberation from sexual and other cultural roles is happening, and increasingly so, in our society strikes me not as a contradiction to the above, but as a result of the rate of change in our society. This change virtually makes it impossible to speak of a constant culture, and actually may have the effect of providing the experience of transcendence of culture.

Anthropology, of course, thrives on the existence of culture. Quite rightly, anthropologists point to culture as what distinguishes us from animals. But unfortunately, most of them are too caught up in culture to transcend it. Usually the oppressive nature of cultures which are not equally shared by the members of the respective societies is accepted as given. Anthropologists do discuss the effects of culture on the members of society — Kaberry, for example, does discuss women's feelings towards the men; and they critically approach each other's evaluations of these effects. But rarely is the basic morality of a culture itself criticized.

This so-called objectivity is really an extreme subjectivity, which is afraid to look at anything in such a way that the viewpoint itself is called into question. If anthropologists criticized cultures on moral grounds, they would be compelled to look at their own culture, and the anthropological discipline which is a part of it, in

in a similar way.

In my estimation, this kind of anthropology makes a largely negative contribution to understanding in that it reinforces the particular cultural perspective of anthropologists. It says, in effect: "Others do it too, so we must be all right" or "we do it too, so they must be all right" (e.g., Kaberry), never asking if maybe all of us are morally in the wrong. Cultural variation in the manner of doing actually supports this attitude: "In spite of all our differences, we are all doing the same thing!"

Given the contradictions, apologetics and failure to ask what I feel to be obvious questions in the writings of those anthropologists whose work I have used as "data", I have often been left wondering how much of the information may actually be "capta" (Laing 1967:52-3). If Kaberry says Aboriginal women are not jealous of the men's religious activities, and yet are proud of having the men at a disadvantage during their own corroborees, I don't feel that she has a clear understanding of what she means by jealousy, let alone that I do.

I am convinced that many anthropologist discredit the experience of the people they are studying — that they are not aware of the existential realities of others — and that this experiential distance is greater the more the anthropologist sees herself or himself as

studying others. The more one tries to be objective, the less one really sees. The more an anthropologist really understands the cultural experience of another people, the less would she or he be able to communicate that experience in anthropological terms. Experience can only be understood by having it. One then becomes the other and that duality ceases to exist. This is what Laing is saying in The Politics of Experience regarding the psychiatrist-patient relationship. The strangeness of a mentally ill person may be very much a reaction to a view of herself or himself as strange, as an "other" experiencing a different reality, on the part of the therapist. Objectification really does objectify. It increases the distance between people so that they cannot see each other in an organic and comprehensible relation to their respective worlds. Laing says that we destroy the experience of others insofar as our own experience is destroyed.

I am suggesting that those anthropologists with whom I have disagreed on their evaluations of women's experience of their social position do not experience what Australian Aborigines, for instance, do experience — because it would mean experiencing themselves more consciously, which for anyone in any situation can be very difficult and painful. This is particularly clear to me when Kaberry says that if an Aboriginal woman's duties seem like drudgery, it is a

fate they share with many European women. She does not go on to question the fate of European women.

In Ecstatic Religion, I.M. Lewis discusses spirit possession and shamanism. This discussion of the former is primarily concerned with peripheral possession cults among women. I feel that the points he makes are highly relevant to what I have been saying in this chapter and in the paper as a whole and think that it would be best here to quote him at length.

Far from being arbitrary and haphazard in its incidence, [in "the social contexts in which ecstasy and possession flourish"] we shall see how a widespread form of possession, which is regarded initially as an illness, is in many cases virtually restricted to women. Such women's possession "afflictions" are regularly treated not by permanently expelling the possessing agency, but by reaching a viable accommodation with it. The spirit is tamed and domesticated, rather than exorcised. This treatment is usually accomplished by the induction of the affected women into a female cult group which regularly promotes possession experiences among its members. Within the secluded cult group, possession has thus lost its malign significance.

Hence what men consider a demoniacal sickness, women convert into a clandestine ecstasy. ...

For all their concern with disease and its treatment, such women's possession cults are also, I argue, thinly disguised protest movements directed against the dominant sex. They thus play a significant part in the sex-war in traditional societies and cultures where women lack more obvious and direct means for forwarding their aims. To a considerable extent they protect women

from the exactions of men, and offer an effective vehicle for manipulating husbands and male relatives. ...

... It is I believe of the greatest importance and interest that these spirits are typically considered to be amoral: they have no direct moral significance. Full of spite and malice though they are, they are believed to strike entirely capriciously and without any grounds which can be referred to the moral character or conduct of their victims. ...

[The women] are thus totally blameless... .

Lewis says the spirits are peripheral because they are amoral, they often originate outside the society in question, and their "favourite victims are usually women, who, as jural minors in traditional societies, also in a sense occupy a peripheral position". He continues:

Such peripheral cults ... also commonly embrace downtrodden categories of men who are subject to strong discrimination in rigidly stratified societies. Peripheral possession is consequently far from being a secure female monopoly, and cannot thus be explained plausibly in terms of any innate tendency to hysteria on the part of women. ...

... The illness requires treatment which his (or her) master has to provide. In his state of possession the patient is a highly privileged person: he is allowed many liberties with those whom in other circumstances he is required to treat with respect.

... The possessed person manipulates his superior without radically questioning his superiority..... If peripheral possession is a gesture of defiance, it is also one of hopelessness.

... We shall find that those who, as masters of spirits, diagnose and treat

illness in others, are themselves in danger of being accused as witches (1971:30-33).

Now I cannot directly use what Lewis says to rebut the statements of those anthropologists with whom I have dealt to the effect that women are satisfied with peripheral participation in men's religious life, or that they are equally happy with their activities which exist by virtue of exclusion from those of men. I cannot do this for two reasons: 1) because Lewis has not written of the same people as the others, and 2) because my sources contain no description of, for example, Aboriginal women's secret ceremonies as possession cults. While such cults may exist in Australia, I am not familiar with whatever relevant literature there may be. I am by no means prepared to say that Kaberry has overlooked this quality of women's ceremonies. But I do feel that it would be valuable to consider what she has presented in the light of what Lewis says.

Kaberry sees women's corroborees as rituals with an "application to an immediate problem" (1939:253). Such is love magic, the major focus of these ceremonies. Similarly, women in the cults described by Lewis gain material goods or attention which they usually lack. In the long run, love magic is probably just as "hopeless" as Lewis describes these other techniques to be — perhaps

even in a much shorter run. But women's corroborations also protect them from the exactions of men, who can be harmed if they do not avoid the secret rites.

Lewis says peripheral possession cults

... may also reflect a response to European conceptions of the status of women. Certainly, at least, such cults are acutely sensitive to changing economic and social conditions, as indeed we should anticipate from their effects (1971:97).

Interestingly, Kaberry mentions that much of women's secret ceremonial life was very new in the Kimberleys (1939:260). Perhaps they are a like response to social change. She adds that they mitigate the effects of marriage rules — a response to European influence?

I find it hard to imagine the peripheral activities I have discussed as being spiritually fulfilling. While it is clear that they provide immediate fulfillment of certain desires — I hesitate to use the word "ecstasy" here as freely as Lewis does — this experience is ultimately held in check by the culture rather than providing transcendence in a spiritual sense. I say this first because Lewis points out that the healers may be seen as able to cause what they are able to cure, and are then dealt with as witches; and secondly, because the experience of either an accused witch or a cult member who is not a healer is restricted by the very nature of peripheral cults — this

includes corroborees — as a hostile reaction to the culture as a whole. I have discussed in Chapter 3 why I feel such motivation would not likely be conducive to free spiritual development.

It seems to me, then, that there are enough common elements to warrant my suggestion that the experience of Kimberley women has not been truly understood. Lewis comes to a similar conclusion regarding Somali women:

The prime targets for the unwelcome attentions of these malign spirits are women, and particularly married women. The stock epidemiological situation is that of the hard-pressed wife, struggling to survive and feed her children in the harsh nomadic environment, and liable to some degree of neglect, real or imagined, on the part of the husband. Subject to frequent, sudden and often prolonged absences by her husband as he follows his manly pastoral pursuits, to the jealousies and tensions of polygamy which are not ventilated in accusations of sorcery and witchcraft, and always menaced by the precariousness of marriage in a society where divorce is frequent and easily obtained by men, the Somali woman's lot offers little stability and security. These, I hasten to add, are not ethnocentric judgements read into the data by a tender-minded western anthropologist, but, as I know from my own direct experience, evaluations which spring readily to the lips of Somali women and which I have frequently heard discussed. Somali tribeswomen are far from being as naive as those anthropologists (see e.g. Wilson, 1967, pp. 67-78) who suppose that tribal life conditions its womenfolk to an unflinching acceptance of hardship and to an unquestioning endorsement of the position accorded them by men (1971:75).

The positive contribution of most anthropology has been, I think, basically unintentional. It consists of the fact that anything in life can be a touchstone for understanding. When Berndt says what I paraphrased as "Even though women are excluded from, they share in ...", or White talks of Aboriginal women as "junior partners", these are contradictions in terms, not paradoxes of social reality. Such contradictions are mirrors in which we can see the broken images of our incomplete understanding. Perhaps it seems that if, in looking at ourselves in others, we see only what we want to see — using a one-way mirror, so to speak — then we are even less likely to see our true reflections in looking directly at ourselves. But here we have a real paradox: the way we see others is a reflection of the way we see ourselves. To change any of it we must start at the beginning, with ourselves. Now that does not mean doing an anthropological study of anthropology, because the basic anthropological assumptions would still not be called into question. The results would be the same as in the case of male "radicals" who, as I discussed in the previous chapter, have ideas about completely "changing" society without questioning the sexist basis of the old system, on the foundations of which they would still construct a new one. Any change would be superficial, an appearance.

(ii) Start Here

I said in the introductory chapter that I do not feel mystical experience is necessarily spiritual: basically, it may involve perpetuation of those cultural values which are oppressive to spirituality. I will go into this once again here, although from a different angle, as I feel it helps to clarify what I mean by spirituality.

It is often thought that a spiritual experience involves surrendering to another, a higher power, be it god, devil, or whatever. Now it strikes me that this process may work in two different ways. It may on the one hand be a surrender of the "self" which is the cultural definition of oneself to that Self which transcends culture. On the other hand it may not entail any growth, if the arbitrary values of one's culture are merely traded for other ones: one is converted to a new religion. In this case, it is still felt that someone else knows what is best for oneself. It is still being an Other. I do not mean to preclude the possibility of spiritual teachers and guides. A spiritual master, for example, may be seen as master of oneself, or as master of himself or herself to a point which one would also like to reach oneself. In the latter instance, the basic decisions affecting one's life are still one's own, and can thus be realized in one's relations with people.

Surrendering to another power, then, is only a spiritual experience if the essence of that power is oneself. Otherwise, it is an assuming of the role of the Other, the essence of the female role in human society. I have previously quoted de Beauvoir on this point, and think it is worth doing so again:

This downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil (1961; xxviii).

I have discussed how religion works to keep females in the role of the Other, to keep them passive —¹ the persons acted upon, as Vatsyayana would say. I have also been saying, essentially, that culture puts all of us, male as well as female, in this position of the Other. While it is a twofold oppression for women, it keeps all of us split within ourselves, repressing the female or male, as the case may be.

De Beauvoir says that, although otherness is a fundamental category of human thought, it "... was not originally attached to the division of the sexes; it was not dependent upon any empirical facts" (1961:xvi-xvii). I said similarly, in the preceding chapter, that the duality in the Yin-Yang symbol can be a dangerous illusion if cultural values of female and male are attributed, respectively, to the black

passive, receptive side or the white active, creative side. This is so regardless of the union between the two and the fact that each is represented as to some extent containing the other.

If we can be liberated from this illusion, then somewhere in us we have always been what we can be. We have been made to forget, been made passive, by religion. So spiritual search must be active. The active striving in the spiritual process leads to a receptivity, an awareness of the relations between oneself and the universe.

To see female as Yin and male as Yang is a sexist attitude. Female and male are not equal-but-different; they are not complementary. Rather, each person is unique. The one difference between people according to which they are called female or male has no bearing on spirituality, on our capacity to grow in awareness. And if such growth is not what we are living for, we may as well have not been born, because we are essentially dead.

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