

In the *Theogony of Hesiod*, dating from around the eighth century BC,

# the first woman is beautiful and evil.

She is the mother of humankind and the reason why there is evil in the world; it is her descendants who torment mankind. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Hermes gives Pandora "a shameful mind and deceitful nature," the power of speech – "lies and crafty words." She is named Pandora, 'All-gifted', because of her box of gifts from the Olympians. These gifts of toil, sickness and death, she scatters to the winds, filling the earth and sea with evil, keeping only hope within the locked box. Yet hope, as we learn later from Nietzsche, is the "most evil of evils, because it prolongs man's torment." Thus, Pandora and her descendants are the mothers of our torment. We have opened the box.



AMBROISE PARÉ. In *Des monstres et des prodiges*. L'œil d'or.

## LILITH

One of the oldest and at the same time most contemporary images of motherhood/womanhood is the figure of Lilith, a 'forgotten androgyne'. (Cf., *inter alia*, Vanessa Rousseau "Lilith: une androgyne oubliée" in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*. 123/2003). The British artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti has two poems from 1868 to accompany a painting titled "Body's Beauty". One is called Lilith:

*Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told  
    (The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,  
    That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,  
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.  
And still, she sits, young while the earth is old,  
    And subtly of herself contemplative,  
    Draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,  
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.*

*The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where  
    Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent  
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?  
    Lo! As that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went  
    Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent,  
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.*

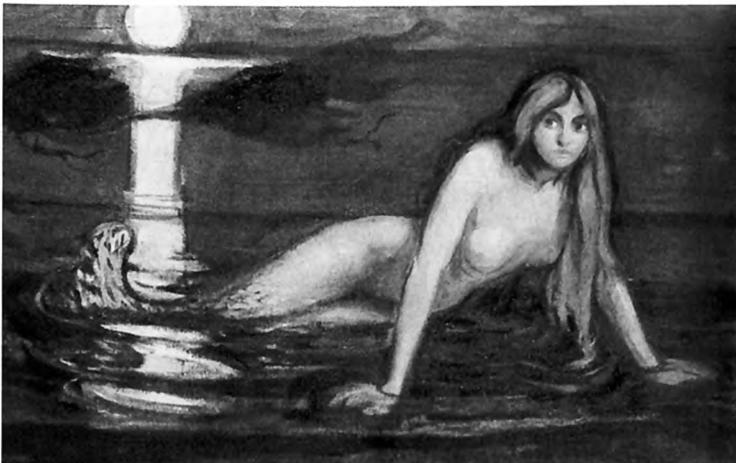
Lilith has supposed origins in Sumero-Akkadian myths, transmitted through the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Assyro-Babylonian astrology, from some 4000 years ago. An obscure mother figure, she takes on various appearances, traversing space and men's dreams, a seductress and witch, vampire or succubus. She's a demon character, often imagined as a beautiful naked woman with long, thick hair, her sex outlined along the contours of her body, while her legs take the form of snakes or hooves; sometimes she has prodigious wings and is accompanied by a lioness or owls. In gnostic imagery, she is dressed in black and seated upon a globe of the same colour, and represents a mother-goddess who presides over carnal pleasures. Depictions of her from the late Middle Ages as a goddess of love and death have given her some popularity in the occult of sexual magic. She is a creature of the night, the personification of temptation.

According to traditions in the Talmud and the Kabbala, Lilith was Adam's first wife, like him born of the clay of the earth, the counterpart of primordial man, his equal and his companion against loneliness. She is a divine androgene, the symbolic opposite of Eve. Refusing to submit to Adam's authority, including the subservient 'missionary' position during sex, she flees from the Garden of Eden and is condemned to Hell. Presented in literature as a devouring female demon, sometimes with masculine traits, she takes up with Satan, Samael. (In Islamic traditions, Lilith marries Satan and gives birth to the jinn, and in later legends she is a demon-goddess of onanism from which the Lilim, demons, are born). These traditions recount that she takes on the form of the snake that tempts Eve and incites Cain to kill his brother Abel. Her images in literature bring together the fears and terrors of the mystery of procreation.. She is a monstrous creature who sucks blood and devours sperm - the virgin mother of demons. According to these legends, Lilith by her nocturnal seductions tempts men into wet dreams or onanism and then devours their sperm from which she becomes pregnant and gives birth to demonic children. She is depicted as possessing exaggerated sexual characteristics with an enormous stomach enclosing the torrents of sperm she has imbibed, a gourmand Venus. At once a virgin and prostitute, she also kidnaps and devours infants. A symbol of disobedience and promiscuity, she is the enemy of 'natural' reproduction.

This image has left its mark throughout the ages on literature, art, and on popular beliefs and superstitions. For example, already in a Greek document from the third century AD, the *Testament of Solomon*, Lilith is described as hovering around the world, presenting herself by various names to encounter women in the act of giving birth in order to strangle the newborn. As a result of this belief, pregnant women and newborn babies were given amulettes, placed on walls and beneath beds, to protect them. If children smiled in their sleep, they were awakened because it was feared that they were playing with Lilith who would carry them away as soon as they had been charmed. Centuries later, especially from the mid nineteenth century, the likes of Goethe, Victor Hugo, Anatole France, de Nerval, Balzac, Oscar Wilde, John Collier, Anaïs Nin, Primo Levi and many others were inspired by her legend. Carl Jung used her as the expression of the *anima*, the suppressed female in men: "It is necessary for old men to become maternal," he explained.

These often contradictory representations of Lilith combine negative attributes of archaic femininity with modern-day fantasies, fantasised sexual partners including, for example, Nabokov's *Lolita*. At the same time, and particularly since the 1970s, feminists like those of 'Women's Cause' have taken Lilith and her image as a positive figure, a model and slogan of female equality. There is a growing literature - academic, polemic and literary - about the 'Lilith phenomenon'. On the internet Lilith is said to be the most representative lamfigure of contemporary lesbian movements. She also has become a fetiche of comic strips like *Manga* with rounded and pointed physical features to represent maternal softness, as well as the strength and violence of manliness. Psychologists have taken an interest in her as a mother symbol for gypsies. She figures in astrology and in lore as the queen or the first and most powerful of vampires and may be presented as the companion or daughter of Dracula, controlling nightmares and erotic dreams. (Cf. Joëlle de Gravelaine, *Le retour de Lilith. La lune noire. L'Espace bleu*, Paris, 2000).

Lilith has also has left her traces on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. In Morocco, the Hamadsha religious order is focused on a female saint, Lalla 'Aisha Qandisha. Dressed in sumptuous clothes, she hides her dried breasts and animal feet and seduces men. Whoever sleeps with her will be ruined, sick, sterile, impotent. An ogre, taller than a man and with the torso of a woman and the legs of a camel, a bloody wound beneath each eye, she roams cemeteries



EDVARD MUNCH. *The Lady from the sea*, 1896.

at night, pursuing the living and the dead, but is particularly fond of capturing men and young children. Her 'official' partner is the jinn Hammu Qiyu whose abode is the abattoir and who has affinities with butchers and blood. Lalla 'Aisha, though deeply feared, is able to protect and cure: she renders her victims mad, but their 'cure' can only be accomplished through the rites of the religious order. The figure of 'Aisha Qandisha has been interpreted as a condensation of masculine and feminine fantasies: the phallic and castrating mother, a sorceress and femme fatale mistress. Lilith personified.

Perhaps the oddest disciple of Lilith was the Englishman Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), also known as The Great Beast, an influential occultist, mystic and magician, and founder of the religious philosophy of Thelema, as well as a prolific writer and still-influential figure among occultists and in popular culture. He despised his mother, who first described him as The Beast, a name he revelled in. Crowley, a bisexual, drug experimenter and social critic, rebelled against moral and religious values and called for libertinism based on the law of Do What Thou Wilt. He was denounced in the popular press as the wickedest man in the world, but in addition to his esoterism he was a keen chess player, mountaineer, poet, playwright and allegedly a spy – a lifelong agent for British intelligence. A BBC poll in 2002 listed him as the seventy-third greatest Briton of all time.

Crowley and his wife Rose Kelly had a daughter whom he named Nuit Ma Ahathoor Hecate Sappho Jezebel Lilith after his favourite mythological females. In a poem addressed to Lilith you find the following verse. It represents one of the faces of Mediterranean motherhood.

*Though thou may be God or Satan, do thou master my death-  
pang with thy life-pang, and possess  
All that I am with all thou art, my Vampire, my Siren  
that I thought a nightingale!  
Abase me! Spit upon me! Scourge me! Murder me!  
Take thy wolf's meat of my loveliness!  
Give me the reek of thy foul breath, and show me the  
leper's face behind the shining veil!*

According to Genesis, Abraham went to Egypt to escape the famine, and out of fear for his life, he claimed that his wife Sarah was his sister. She was then taken into the house of Pharaoh and made his wife. As punishment for this deed, the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with plagues until Sarah was returned to Abraham. This puzzling story of the sister-wife recurs again in Genesis, and later we learn that Sarah was actually Abraham's half-sister. We are in another world from our notions of kinship, of family and incest.

OR SARAI, FEMME D'ABRAM, NE LUI AVAIT PAS DONNÉ D'ENFANT, ET ELLE AVAIT UNE SERVANTE, UNE ÉGYPTIENNE NOMMÉE AGAR.



NOW SARAI ABRAM'S WIFE BARE HIM NO CHILDREN : AND SHE HAD AN HANDMAID, AN EGYPTIAN, WHOSE NAME WAS HAGAR. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing; go in, I pray thee, unto my handmaid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.

ET LE MESSAGER DE L'ÉTERNEL LA TROUVA PRÈS D'UNE SOURCE DANS LE DÉSERT, LA SOURCE SUR LE CHEMIN DE SHUR.



AND THE ANGEL OF THE LORD FOUND HER BY A FOUNTAIN OF WATER IN THE WILDERNESS, BY THE FOUNTAIN IN THE WAY TO SHUR. And he said, Hagar, Sarai's handmaid, whence camest thou? and whither goest thou?.

Subsequently Sarah, unable to conceive, gives her Egyptian slave-girl Hagar to Abraham so that he may have children with her. The story is well known: Hagar gives birth to Ishmael; Sarah, 14 years later, conceives and bears Isaac, a son to Abraham in their old age, and then following the demands of Sarah, Hagar is banished into the wilderness by Abraham.

Rabbinical commentaries assert that Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter, that when Sarah was in his harem he gave her Hagar as a slave. Later Sarah is said to have considered Ishmael sexually frivolous, and the commentators develop this into idolatry, sexual immorality, or even murder. Some rabbinic sources claim that Sarah worried that Ishmael would be a bad influence on Isaac, or would demand his inheritance as the first-born.

The name Hagar is associated with the Hebrew root to emigrate (*hagayra*), as is Hajar in Arabic, (viz. *hijra*, and the Muslim calendar, the Hegira, which begins with the Prophet Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina). In the Qur'an neither Sarah nor Hagar receive mention, but the story is referred to in the Surah of Ibrahim (14:37-40): "Our Lord, I have settled some of my progeny in a valley where no vegetation grows, near your Sacred House, our Lord, that they may perform the prayers... Praise be to God Who granted me, though old, Ishmael and Isaac!"

Islamic tradition, however, frequently speaks of Hagar. In a collection of tales about the prophets, she is depicted as a daughter of the King of Maghreb who was taken into slavery when her father was killed in battle with the Pharaoh. She is later given to Sarah who then gives her to Abraham. Ishmael's birth causes conflict with the still-barren Sarah and leads Abraham to bring Hagar and Ishmael to Paran-Aram (Arabic *Faran*), the area surrounding Mecca, to "resettle" rather than "banish" Hagar. Mother and son are left under a tree and provided with a little water. It is related that God ordered Abraham to send her away in order to test his obedience to His commands. Soon Hagar has no water and Ishmael, described as a baby, is dying of thirst. Hagar panics. She repeatedly climbs two nearby hills in the search for water. Then, after her seventh climb, she is rescued by the archangel Gabriel who causes a miraculous well to spring out of the ground: it is the well of Zamzam, a few metres from the Ka'aba of Mecca.

This story of Hagar's repeated attempts to find water to save the life of Ishmael, her running between the hills called Safa and Marwah, developed into the Muslim rite of *sa'i*: during the

pilgrimages of the Hajj and the Umra, pilgrims walk or run between the two hills seven times in memory of the search for water by Hagar. Water from the well of Zamzam is then drunk and bottled as a souvenir to her sacred memory. In the Muslim portrayal of Hagar she is wise, patient, resolute and confident, certain that God will not abandon them. But she fears for her son. The story of Hagar's running between the hills of Safa and Marwah established the ritual of the seven periginations between the two hills. She became a heroic figure in her devotion to her son and her adoration of God.

In Abdellah Hammoudi's *A Season in Mecca. Narrative of a Pilgrimage* (Translated from the French. Hill and Wang, New York, 2005), Hagar receives special attention. The Hajj is a reenactment, the pilgrims have gathered there to follow in the traces of Ibrahim, Hajar, Isma'il and the Prophet Muhammad, "names today spoken, recited and sung with great resonance". The Hajj is "a ritual narrative" and a "family story" of "that impossible link between Sarah and Hajar, the first mother to make Ibrahim a father. This matrix links Muslims to Jews and Copts via Egyptian parentage to Sarah and Isaac." It has the tensions and jealousies of a family saga: the exile into the desert, Hajar's patience and will to survive, the scorned wife and mother saving her offspring and keeping the lineage alive. The Ka'aba, the black meteorite cube that becomes the refoundation of the House of God, serves according to Muslim tradition to reunite the family of Hajar, Isma'il and Ibrahim. The father returns after the mother has saved the son. He has received a divine order to leave Jerusalem for the still-uninhabited Mecca and to settle his family there. A lineage has been established from Ibrahim and Hajar to Isma'il, regarded as the patriarch of 'the Arabs'.

In effect, Hagar and Sarah are ancestresses of monotheism, of Abrahamic faiths, the one the mother of Ishmael, the other the mother of Isaac: two prophets, brothers, and sons of the same father. A merchant from Rabat making the pilgrimage with Hammoudi tells him: "All these rites are the traces of our father Ibrahim. He abandoned his son and his wife in a deserted valley, with nothing. But he knew that God's mercy worked. One day he spoke to God: "Give me another sign!" And the merchant goes on to recount what that sign was, a story of birds cut into quarters which God then brings back to life.

The Hajj includes another aspect of the Muslim story of Ibrahim: the sacrifice. The sacrifice of Isma'il takes place long after

the ordeal of Hajar and God's gift of restored life when he guided her in the desperate race between the hills until she came upon the well of Zamzam, and Isma'il was saved. Ibrahim has a vision and is commanded to sacrifice his son Isma'il. The two of them agree and make a journey to the killing place. Hammoudi tells us that the pilgrims reenact this story as if they are themselves Isma'il. The sacrifice is men's business. Hajar, who has given up everything so that her son might live, is mute, absent. For Hammoudi, it is difficult to understand the piety of women in these dramas. They do not put themselves forward, yet they have authority, even power in their behind-the-scenes division of labour, in sexuality, reproduction, in the formation of the father, and in masculine fantasies and obsessions.

Christian commentary regards the story of Hagar as a complex allegory. It can be found in *Epistle to the Galatians* (4:22-31) by Saint Paul: "For it is written that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all." Paul links the laws of the Five Books of Moses to Mount Sinai and the enslavement of the Israelites, implying that this is signified by Hagar's condition as a slave. The 'free' heavenly Jerusalem, however, is signified by Sarah and her son. Hagar represents bondage to the 'old law' and the Jews are seen as spiritual descendants of Hagar, not Sarah. This was to become a justification for the subordination of Jews in medieval Christian kingdoms and even their expulsion on the model of the subjection and expulsion of Hagar. Paul's view was further developed by Saint Augustine: "In the earthly city (symbolised by Hagar)...we find two things, its own obvious presence and the symbolic presence of the heavenly city. New citizens are begotten to the earthly city by nature vitiated by sin but to the heavenly city by grace freeing nature from sin" (*City of God*, 15:2). Medieval Christian theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and John Wycliffe compared the children of Sarah to the redeemed and those of Hagar to the unredeemed, "carnal by nature and mere exiles".

Scenes from the story of Hagar have been depicted by many artists and written about by Shakespeare, Defoe, Coleridge, and more recent American novelists. Hagar's expulsion has also, not

unexpectedly, taken a political dimension in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a symbol of the Palestinian catastrophe, the *nakba* of 1948. Baby girls have been named Hagar by Jewish Israelis sympathetic to reconciliation with the Palestinians and Hajar by Arab supporters of the Palestinian cause. The figure of Hagar as slave has also found a place in the discourse of black American feminists. She is seen as a model of “power, skills, strength and drive” and the relationship between Sarah and Hagar as exhibiting “ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and social exploitation”.

## **THE GREEKS**

Homer's *Odyssey* must be one of the foundation texts for looking at Mediterranean mothers. As every Greek knew, swallows migrate and return to the nest they previously inhabited. But Odysseus's absence of 20 years was too much to bear, and his mother died, nursing her grief and yearning for his return. When he meets her in Hades, she tells him that she had not been attacked by any of the malignant diseases that make the body waste away and die: “No, it was my heartache for you, my glorious Odysseus, and for your wise and gentle ways, that brought my life with all its sweetness to an end.”

“These were my mother's words. Without knowing whether I could, I yearned to embrace her spirit, dead though she was..... ‘Mother!’, I cried with words that winged their way to her. ‘Why do you not wait for me? I long to reach you, so that even in Hell we may throw our loving arms round each other and draw cold comfort from our tears. Or is this a mere phantom that august Persephone has sent me to increase my grief?’”

“‘Alas, my child,’ came my revered mother's reply, ‘ill-fated above all men! This is no trick played on you by Persephone, daughter of Zeus. It is the law of our mortal nature, when we come to die. We no longer have sinews keeping the bones and flesh together; once life has departed from our white bones, all is consumed by the fierce heat of the blazing fire, and the soul slips away like a dream and goes fluttering on its ways. But now quickly make for the light! And bear in mind all you have learned here, so that one day you can tell your wife.’” (Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translated by E.V. Rieu. Revised by his son D.C.H. Rieu in consultation with P.V. Jones. Penguin Books, London, 1991. *The Book of the Dead*, II:200-220).

When Odysseus does return to Penelope, his wife, their son Telemachus remonstrates with his mother: “...my hard-hearted mother, unmotherly mother, why do you keep your distance from my

father like this? Why aren't you sitting at his side, talking and asking questions? No other woman would have had the perversity to hold out like this against a husband who had just returned to her in his native land after 20 wearisome years. But then your heart was always harder than flint.'

'My child, the shock has numbed it,' she said. 'I cannot find a word to say to him; I cannot ask him anything at all; I cannot even look him in the face. But if it is really Odysseus home again, we two shall soon know each other more certainly; for there are signs hidden from others which only we two know.'" (Book 23: 95-110).

These scenes from ancient Greek literature are as moving and instructive in regard to motherhood as any contemporary novel. We are nurtured by them, consciously or not. The mother figures are life-size. Neither saints nor sorciers.

### **SOME "SAINTLY" MOTHERS**

The figure of Mary in Christianity is too large to mention other than in passing. As the virgin mother of Jesus, she is the Mother of God, His birthgiver. Her veneration among the faithful is limitless and can be seen in places of worship and in all forms of art. She symbolises humility and obedience to the message of God in a great variety of forms and contexts of time and place, yet she is always conceived of as an example for all ages of Christians.

Among Muslims, Mary (Sayyida Maryam in the Arabic), mother of Jesus ('Aysa) by immaculate conception is one of the most righteous women in the Islamic tradition. She receives more mention in the Quran, where an entire Surah is devoted to her, than in the entire New Testament. Like her son 'Aysa, Maryam is not divine, but she is a paragon of chastity and virtue.

More central to the pantheon of Muslim saintly figures is Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, the wife of his nephew 'Ali and the mother of Hasan, and of Husayn, the martyr of the Battle of Karbala, the founding drama of Shi'ite Islam. The wives of the Prophet of Islam are considered 'the Mothers of the Faithful'. His first wife, Khadija, gave birth to two boys who died as children and four daughters – Zaynab, Raqi'a, Umm Kalthum and Fatima az-Zahra. The last named also was known as Umm Abiha (the Mother of her Father) and as the Virgin Fatima. She died within 75 days of

the death of the Prophet and probably was buried in Medina. It is said that her father offered her to the world as the perfect example of womanhood because of the manner in which she fulfilled her maternal duties and religious obligations.

These women and mother figures continue to represent symbols in the Islamic world. Thus, in the late 1960s one of the most influential Iranian intellectuals, a sociologist and revolutionary, Ali Shariati (1933-1977), lecturing at a teaching institute in Tehran, wrote a paper based on a lecture he had given entitled "Fatima is Fatima". He wanted to refer to the "deep and revolutionary influence" invoked by Fatima, the role she has played in Islamic transformations and the important question of womanhood in today's society. He addressed himself specifically to women and their search for an ideal example, a heroine, to the question 'who am I'? In his experience, Fatima even after her life had ended kept alive the spirit of those who seek justice and oppose oppression and discrimination in Islamic society. Muslim women today, he argued, want to make decisions through reason and choice, and to relate these to history, religion and society whose spirit and basis come from Islam. There is a desire to be reborn, and in this re-birth they want to be their own midwives. In this respect people continue to speak about Fatima. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims cry for her every year at gatherings, prayer meetings, festivals, mourning ceremonies. Her generosity is remembered. Rituals of lamentation take place where her suffering is recreated and those who offended her are damned. Wisdom and love are needed, the one for common sense and understanding, the other for strength, enthusiasm and movement. Religion, in particular, needs both.

Zaynab, the sister of Imam Husayn, is alluded to by Shariati as someone who continued the movement of Karbala, who opposed murder, terror and hysteria when all the heroes were dead. He calls for learning – treatises for Muslims which inform them about who the Prophet and Fatima were, how their children lived and thought. The lives and thoughts, experiences of prison and martyrdom can contribute awareness, chastity, and humanity to people. "If a woman cries with her whole being, if the recollection of the name of Fatima and Zaynab burns her to her bones, and if she would with complete love give her life for them, and yet she does not thoroughly know Fatima and Zaynab, who is responsible?" Fatima is the perfect example of an ideal woman. Her children, the grandchildren of the Prophet, brought a revolution to mankind, fought for honour

and freedom and opposed despotism and oppression. Shariati compares the House of the Prophet to the Ka'aba of Mecca in which the children and inheritors of Abraham reside. "It is a sign and a symbol. It is real." The metaphor is then carried over into economic and class exploitation. A new class has been created, characterised by foreignness and modernisation, adoring the West, without religion. That is why, Shariati states, Fatima talks to the modern world.

### **TAHIRIH OF THE BABI MOVEMENT**

In mid-nineteenth-century Iran a woman who was to become a heroic and venerated symbol of the Baha'i religious community became prominent as a disciple of the Bab, a cleric and founder of a new religious movement. She was called Tahirih ('Pure'). Her full name was Fatima Zarrin Taj Baraghani, Qurratu'l-'Ayn. ('Solace of the eyes'). She appears to have symbolised modern female liberation. She left her husband and children to embark on a vision of a just society. Travelling widely throughout Iran, as learned as the clerics, she preached to audiences of both men and women. Defying accepted social and cultural rules, she removed her veil in public meetings and called for a break with the past. She became a martyr following the attempt on the life of the shah in 1851, strangled by her own scarf and buried in the courtyard well of a religious official in Teheran. Whether she was a champion of women's rights, as some claim, or a daughter of her own culture and religion is a subject argued over by historians. But what is clear is that she was a deeply religious mystic with messianic tendencies. Moreover, many saw her as a reincarnation of Fatima Zohra, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, personifying the virtues and qualities for which Fatima was a symbol among Shi'ites. (cf. Todd Lawson, "The Authority of the Feminine and Fatima's Place in an Early Work by the Bab" in *Online Journal of Baha'i Studies*, vol. 1 (2007).

Nonetheless, the figures of Fatima and Tahirih have important differences. In the Islamic tradition, Fatima's sacredness is secured by her lineage, her marriage and her maternal love, which is not the case for Tahirih. Fatima has been considered an 'activist' and a hero within the context of seventh century Arabia. Moreover, and most importantly, Fatima has the recognised status of an equal to the imams and the Prophet Muhammad in religious authority, in *walaya*, a rather complicated notion that Lawson explains in detail. This attribute of equality in religious authority is shared by

Tahirih. Not only does she assume the rôle of Fatima, she is Fatima. Important parallels are drawn : Both women are associated with 'mercy'. The term, in Arabic *rahma*, has the same root as *rahim*, the word for 'uterus' or 'womb. Furthermore, they are qualified by love and knowledge. Fatima is Umm abiha, "the mother of her father", and venerated as the mother of her two sons and by extension as the mother of all imams of Twelver Shi'ism. Tahirih does not share these attributes, but she does share veneration and honour. And she represents the dramatic reappearance of Fatima.

Among the Baha'is, Tahirih, the Babi heroine, is a "luminary of the faith". Their leading thinkers spoke of the "feminisation of humanity" as a precondition for the establishment of universal peace. In the view of the historian Todd Lawson, the idea of the "equality of the sexes" here, however much it may appear as modern and western, is in fact an outgrowth of Islamic culture. If one accepts that interpretation, the line runs from Fatima to Tahirih and to Muslim reformists and to the Baha'is.

If I have steered away from a focus on motherhood, there is an inevitability to that. The Mediterranean mother has appeared everywhere and in myriad forms. She is like the Prophet's daughter Umm Kulthum, whose name we better know as Egypt's greatest vocalist, also called "The Fourth Pyramid", "The Nightingale of the Nile", and "The Nun of Islam". Umm al-kitab is the "Mother of the Book", Umm al-Ula is the "Original Mother" that is Baghdad. And, as we know from other languages, the semantic field of 'mother' is vast. *La grande madre*, Mother Earth, is applied to people as well as places. Samuel Johnson, according to Boswell, opined that "the grand object of travelling is to see the shores of the Mediterranean." We may add "and its mothers."