

## CAT AND WOMAN: A CASE OF GENDER POLARITY

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Thou art the Great Cat, the avenger of the gods, and the judge of words, and the president of the sovereign chiefs, and the governor of the Holy Circle; thou art indeed the Great Cat.<sup>1</sup>*

*The most well-groomed and favourite domestic animal is undoubtedly the cat, the friend of the lonely woman. The female gender is expected to be domesticated. Nobody speaks about grooming a member of the male gender to make him fit for the home. A cat that is not friendly and homely is never picked and provided; it must cater to our needs and be necessarily cute and endearing to enjoy the privileges. A wild cat and an “unconforming” woman are never accepted home. Thus, cat and woman share a similar fate. Denise M. Driscoll, a social psychologist, count cat as the indicators of human cultural adolescence: they entered human experience when people were making the difficult transition from hunting and gathering to settled communities engaging in sedimentary agriculture.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Gender Polarity, Women, Felines*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Cat, a popular feline animal, occupies a very prominent position in the myths and popular culture. Various cultures and religions attributed certain characteristic features to cats which helped them to make a mark in the history of civilizations. Cats, an important breed of pets are mostly portrayed as the companions in solitude of women, especially the “abandoned” women. Like woman, a cat, is counted as loyal and ever conforming. The marital fidelity of woman is often equated to the loyalty of cats, which once befriend a family never leave the house, and are known for their ability to navigate across continents to rejoin their owners. Cat and woman come together in social codes as in cat-walk, cat-fight, cat-calls, and so on referring to the female gender. Various cultural practices and beliefs bring in several such fundamental thoughts. A cat totem is believed to encourage agility where it is accepted: in order to ward off negative energy, one need only to place a cat on the lap or keep it as a pet to realign the energy field and restore the inner balance. We have similar beliefs in India pertaining to woman that God resides wherever woman are worshipped or revered.

Carl Jung, in his exploration of the Unconscious, discovered psychic patterns of mind at the deepest levels. These images found to be the same in all individuals which could be traced to religions and myths across time and space, came to be termed the archetypes. Jung explains:

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<sup>1</sup>Inscription on the Royal Tombs at Thebes.

Whereas the personal unconscious consists for the most part of “complexes”, the content of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of “archetypes”. The concept of the archetype, which is an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious, indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere. Mythological research calls them ‘motifs’; in the psychology of primitives they correspond to Levy-Bruhl’s concept of “representations collectives,” and in the field of comparative religion they have been defined by Hubert and Mauss as ‘categories of the imagination’... My thesis, then, is as follows: In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. (Archetypes, 42-43)

The functioning of the cat’s eyes with its X-ray vision, its unearthly wailings and acute hearing, the purring contentment with which it suckles its young ones, the diabolical cruelty that it exhibits with its prey, and its high intelligence have given cats a certain archetypal quality. Similarly, the archetypal image of the maternal-feminine has been in circulation through time and space. The cat as well as the maternal feminine has been archetypal images in cultural expressions. Jung explains the characteristics of primordial images, which are archetypal:

The primordial image, or archetype, is a figure- be it a daemon, a human being, or a process- that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed. Essentially, therefore, it is a mythological figure. (...) In each of these images there is a little piece of human psychology and human fate, a remnant of the joys and sorrows that have been repeated countless times in our ancestral history. (Collected Works, 81)

According to Jung, myths arise from the universal and underlying collective unconscious, biologically inherited and born anew in each individual and they reveal the mind and character of a people. But psychoanalysts argue that dreams reflect the unconscious desires and anxieties of the individuals and disclose the aspects of individual personality, while myths are the symbolic projections of a people’s hopes, values, fears and aspirations. As a matter of fact, both cat and woman are associated with myth, lore, magic and mystery. Biologically, cats have more rods in the retina of their eyes which enable them to see effectively in the dark. Conventionally, darkness is associated with evil and fears. Thus, cat’s activity in the night makes it an ally to the world of the supernatural, peopled with witches and their craft. In Yeats’s poem “The Cat and the Moon,” he calls cat the nearest kin to the moon. There are also references to cat regarded as the child of the moon. For instance, Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, observed that the she-cats loved the moon and its glowing eyes in the dark were representations of the phases of the moon.

The cat-moon association drawn into a broad analogy with the woman-moon association can be found in the myths of the Triple Goddess and Moon, where the three phases of the moon are regarded as mirroring the three incarnations in the life of a woman: maiden, mother and the crone of the Triple Goddess. The moon’s connection to night and the fears and superstitions are considered the reflection of the dark old crone who can foretell death and therefore feared and respected. This connection is further extended to the studies conducted which show that the menstruation cycle of women is affected by the lunar calendar. Thus, the cat-moon-woman analogy comes to a full circle. Mythologically and anthropologically, cats, regarded as a symbol of femininity, sensuality and sexuality, occupied a deity image in many cultures and civilizations. For instance, cat was associated with the demon of lust and the King of Demons, Asmodeus, responsible for manipulating people’s sexual desires. Down the ages, cat was worshipped as a goddess, or feared as an

agent of the devil, sacrificed to evil spirits or cherished for its powers of healing. The fortunes of the cat fluctuated throughout history and similarly the position of women also saw ups and down.

Equations between cat and woman can be found in other instances as well: both are being linked to prosperity and reproductivity. A ninth century proverb reads that if a cat washes its face and ears, it will rain and rain causes seeds to sprout and leads to eventual abundance. In India, the ill-treatment of women is strongly despised in Vedic scriptures; similarly, an Irish belief proclaims that to kill a cat would bring seventeen years of bad luck. There are also other sayings: beware of people who dislike the cats; the dog is for a man and the cat for a woman; a good wife and a good cat are best at home; and so on. In Egypt, the cats first achieved the ranks of Totem and then entered the pantheon of the Egyptian gods. Egyptian word for cat is Mau which means who see. God Ra, the God of Sun, who killed the God of Night every morning was represented as feline. Mafdet was the Egyptian feline goddess of justice and execution and she was depicted as a woman with the head of a feline. She was often represented in art as either a woman with a feline head or vice versa and sometimes with braided hair, which ended in the tails of scorpions. It was said that she ripped out the hearts of the wrong doers and delivered them to the Pharaoh's feet in a manner similar to how the domestic cats present people with rodents or birds that they have killed or maimed. Goddess Bast, assumed to be the guardian of the sacred temple, was also a symbol of femininity and the goddess of love and fertility and the protector of harvests. Cats were embalmed in Egypt, when they died and thousands of mummies were later excavated.

The Greek Goddess Artemis, sister of Apollo, was believed to have created the cat. In Germania, the cats accompanied the goddess of beauty and love, Freyja. The term means lady and she is the mistress of magic and her system of magic is called Sejdth which is very similar to shamanism and involves trance. Her personal transport is a magnificent chariot drawn by two large grey cats. She was the wife of Odin, and she shared his wisdom and foresight. She protected men's marriage and made them fruitful. She is often identified with Gefjon, the Giver, who was a Goddess of fertility. Her sister Hel, from whose name we get the English word hell, rules the underworld and is symbolized in the image of a cat. The sacred Siamese legend states that when a Siamese king died, his soul would pass on to a Siamese cat which then would be present at the time of the coronation of the succeeding king. In Japan, at the time of the emperor Hidijo, cats were ordered to be pampered. They also believe in the legend of the Beckoning Cat, ManekiNeko, who saved the life of a feudal lord and became an incarnation of the Goddess of Mercy, Bodhisattva. There are dozens of statues of this cat in the Gotoku-ji temple and believe to beacon in health, wealth, happiness and harmony.

For the Arabs, unlike the dogs, the cats have a pure spirit. During the seventh century there was the concept of the Golden Cat, which was worshipped in Arabia. Prophet Muhammad(PBUH) is believed to have domesticated a cat named Muezza. There is a legend which states that he chose to cut his clothes rather than to disturb the cat, which was sleeping on his sleeves. In Islam, cats are not considered as naajis or impure and hence are permitted to be kept at home. There is a reported saying of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that a woman entered hell because of a cat which she tied up, which was neither fed nor let loose to feed upon the vermin of the Earth.

There is no direct mention of cats in the Bible. This is because the Israelites distrusted everything associated with the Egyptians who ruled over them. Hence they hated the cats, which were held in high esteem by the Egyptians. In Christianity, the basic nature of cat is defined as evil or beast like, and cats are often put together with Satan, the original serpent and the great dragon. Under Christianity, a believer is to guard himself from idols and is not permitted to worship

any other god, and thus the worship of cats were strongly despised. The church attributed strange and evil powers to the cat in order to destroy the Egyptian myths and the forms of pagan worship associated with this feline animal. There is also the story about how God created the cat to save the Noah's Ark which was in danger due to the devil's mouse which was set to destroy all life in the Ark by gnawing a hole into it. It is widely believed that the Manx cat lost its tail when it was boarding the Noah's Ark and the door closed on its tail.

During the time of Buddha, the cat became a symbol of purity and worked as an intercessor between Buddha and his followers. Cats are seen at the feet of some statues of Buddha. Hippolyte Taine has observed that though he studied many philosophers and cats, the wisdom of cats is infinitely more superior. There is a Celtic belief that the cats' eyes are windows through which human beings can explore an inner world. Thus, in various cultures like Egyptian, Greek, Siamese, and in countries like Japan and India, and religions like Islam, Christianity and so on, close association can be inferred between cat and woman.

According to the cosmological theories of the Shaktapuranas, the Great Goddess, as Adi Shakti or primal energy, created Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva from her own body. Having divided her own self into three parts, she performed a cosmic dance with them as a result of which the universe and life came into existence. Saktas states that Shiva without Shakti is only a corpse and it is mother's energy that transforms the corpse and provides life. Adi Shakti put herself into different gradations; first gradation as Saraswati, Lakshmi, etc; second gradation as Tulsi, Shashtietc and third gradation as the the gramadevatas or village deities. Shashti in India, is the Goddess of married women and is the giver and guardian of children. She is represented as a golden complexioned woman with a child in her arms riding on a cat and hence no Hindu woman would ever injure a cat lest she should offend this Goddess and be made to suffer for it.

The female divine from the prehistoric times stood either for sustenance and fertility or for destruction and death in India. Most of the Hindu vaishnavites depend on god for salvation. As the mother cat cares for the baby cat, the worshippers surrender and the god(mother) protects them(baby cats). Connected to this idea is the common dichotomy between cat religions and monkey religions. In the latter, as the mother monkey is not paying attention to the baby, the believers are on their own and for them god is a source of strength and love, which is available only with the participation of the individual. In Hinduism, the equation is most obvious in the goddess of Shashti, and thus it can be inferred that cat, woman and fertility are linked in belief systems.

In Shaktism, the highest place was accorded to the female principle and its basis was the primitive, empirical and analogical belief in the equation of the earth with woman as natural, connecting both to fertility. Between AD 1000 and 1300, a section of the followers of Kashmir Shaivism developed a peculiar monistic form of Shaktism known as Shaktyadvayavada, according to which the material world is the parinama or the consequence of Shakti. This was also based on the equilibrium of Shiva and Shakti, where the latter was conceived as the essence of the former. Shakti is often called prakasha-vimarshamaya. Of the numerous meanings of vimarsha one is vibration and the term was used expressively in the case of Shakti while Shiva was visualised as prakasha. If the example of a man is used, prakasha is his mental and intellectual faculties and the awareness of those faculties is the vimarsha. The first mentioning of the Goddess as the Supreme Being occurs in the fifth century AD puranic text, *Devimahatmya* which means the Glorification of the Goddess and contains the hymns of praise that are still in popular use.

During the middle ages, cats became an anathema in Europe. All over the globe, cats were looked down with distrust. As cats are nocturnal and roam at night they were believed to be supernatural servants of witches or even witches themselves and hence hundreds of cats were killed. The classical stereotype of the witch was an old woman possibly with green or grey skin wearing a pointed hat and clad in black with a broomstick for transportation and a black cat. After serving Freyja for seven years the cats were believed to be rewarded by turning into witches disguised as black cats. The ears of the cats were cut in Germany; they were thrown from the top of the cathedrals in Belgium; and cats were walled up as a measure to protect the house against the evil spirits in France.

In 962 AD, in the northeastern French town of Metz, the ceremony of Cat Wednesday was observed on the second Wednesday of Lent when cats were burnt alive. The villain of one of the first important trials of English witches in 1566 was a white spotted cat called Sathan, which was believed to be feeding on its mistress's blood. The official persecution was initiated by Pope Gregory IX, which lasted for next eight centuries and later Pope Innocent VIII issued another papal bull in 1484 that condemned a witch's cat and declared that it was to be burned alive with her at her execution. Thus, during the Middle Ages, cats became symbols of evil and Satan. The English scholar, Gervase of Tilbury in *Otia Imperialia* referred to a popular belief: "...women have been seen and wounded in the shape of cats by persons who were secretly on the watch and... the next day the women have shown wounds and loss of limbs" (Miller, 95). Thus, women and cats were often burnt together for crimes of witchcraft.

With the Age of Enlightenment, the feline returned to the grace. All elements connected to the witchcraft were demystified and cats became a symbol of cleanliness, especially due to the fact that they spent long hours cleaning themselves. This was particularly important as this age was marked by a phobia of animals that were regarded as potential carriers of diseases. The mass burning of cats also led to the proliferation of rats leading to the Great Plague during the Middle Ages. Women have also passed through similar historical experiences of persecution: though initially revered like goddesses, they have been subsequently despised by patriarchy and religion. They were considered source of life and being in religious imagination, but they lost their glorious position by the male control of religions and society. Patriarchy and religions colluded to confine women to the domestic space.

The maternal feminine is celebrated in various religions as the source of life and fertility and is closely connected to the reproductive cycle. It is particularly interesting to view the images of goddesses at the Neolithic site at CatalHayuk in Turkey. In this regard James Mellaart commented:

...as the only source of life she(woman) became associated with the processes of agriculture, with the taming and nourishing of domesticated animals with the ideas of increase, abundance and fertility. Hence a religion which aimed at exactly that same conversation of life in all its forms, its propagation and the mysteries of its rites connected with life and death, birth and resurrection were evidently part of her sphere rather than that of man. It seems extremely likely that the cult of the Goddess was administered mainly by women, even if the presence of male priests was by no means excluded (36).

In the Paleolithic era, the status of idols often exaggerated the sexual features portraying large breasts, hips and belly to emphasize fertility and potential motherhood. In the Laussel cave in Dordogne, for instance, a painting of the act of childbirth was found which focus on the concept of mother as creator. Many scholars thus suggest that the cult of the Mother Goddess existed in some form or other throughout the ages. During the Indus Valley civilization, for example, pottery images of the goddesses were kept in almost every house; but along with them, phallic objects symbolizing the

father or the male principle were also kept. In course of time, however, the masculinised objects gained the upper hand. Later, with the prominence of the sexist religions, women were painted as a temptresses responsible for the mistakes of man. In the initial days of human settlement and during the ancient civilizations, cats and women thus enjoyed predominant places. But with the passage of time, a subversion of power dynamics occurred, and gendersegregation and gender bias drove women to the margins as the patriarchal strategies aimed at to portray women physically, economically, socially and intellectually weak.

A close reading of myths, religions and various cultural representations shows how the association of cat and woman has been manipulated in the history to propagate the patriarchal agenda. In contemporary times, the symbol of cat is appropriated to represent women especially in popular culture and visual media, as part of a conscious sexist agenda to perpetuate the subordination of women and legitimate gender oppression and commodification of female body. Thus, in the case of the tamed pet cat or the tamed and domesticated woman, the objective is the amusement of men. Cats are established as the symbol for femininity and female sexuality, especially due to their charming appearance and timid mannerisms in the presence of public. A cat always moves away from the crowd and the patriarchal society expects the same from women. A deciphering of various representations of media and culture clearly reveals that men and his privileged gaze are authorized to deal with both cats and women in a manner exclusively satisfactory for men. The cat-woman analogy is first suggested through cultural productions to create a mindset and later extended to the public sphere to legitimate the gender hegemony women have been experiencing for ages.

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