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On the Fantasy of Decapitation of Women and Denial of their Creativity

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Using material from the analysis of a male patient, the author examines the meanings of the decapitated body of a woman in various religious and cultural beliefs and myths, including those represented by the image of the Hindu goddess Lajja Gauri, and the relevance of these to male denial of creativity in women. Material demonstrating the relationship between feelings of loneliness and the urge to create is also presented.

Across time and geography, various writings from archeology, art, history, myth, and religion give evidence both of fantasies about decapitation and of its reality. For example, the pre-Columbian Moche people of Peru had a god called the "decapitator" by archeologists. He was depicted as part man and part spider, holding a decapitated head in one hand. In Western art, decapitation has often been depicted in the context of a religious story or mythological event; David with the head of Goliath, Salome with the head of John the Baptist, and Judith with the head of Holofernes have been repeatedly painted. That the image of decapitation has been so widespread and varied is indicative of the intensity of the emotions and complexity of the fantasies attached to it.

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One image from among multiple ones of decapitation will be explored here (see **Figure 2**, p. 482). It is the image of a decapitated woman that came to play an important role in the analysis of a male patient. In addition, this patient also became preoccupied with a four-headed figure of the Hindu god Brahma (see **Figure 1**, p. 475).

One of the most familiar variants of the image of the decapitated woman is that of Medusa, one of the Gorgons, the three monstrous sisters of Greek mythology. The hero Perseus cut off her head and gave it to the goddess Athena, who wore it on her shield. Freud (1922) interpreted that this monstrous head with snakes for hair unconsciously represented the female (maternal) genitals displaced upward. Freud (1923) added, "What is indicated in the myth is the mother's genitals. Athena, who carried the Medusa's head on her armor, becomes in consequence the unapproachable woman, the sight of whom extinguishes all thought of a sexual approach" (p. 143). Despite some disagreements with or additions to this viewpoint, all writers who have commented on it, both psychoanalytic ones (Baiter 1969; Ferenczi 1923; Miller 1958; Reik 1951; Seelig 2002) and nonpsychoanalytic ones (D'Angelo 1995; Delaney 1995; Doniger 1995; Eilberg-Schwartz 1995; Lang 1995; Levine 1995), have agreed that the head was unconsciously equated with the female genitals.

Freud (1916) explored another Greek legend in which a woman was symbolically decapitated. In it a woman named Baubo tried to amuse the goddess Demeter by lifting her dress up to cover her head and expose her genitals. Freud noted:

During the excavations at Priene in Asia Minor some terracotta figures were found that represented Baubo. They show the body of a woman without head or chest and with a face drawn on her abdomen: the lifted dress frames this face like a crown of hair. [pp. 337-338]

Lubell (1994), in an extensive work on Baubo and Baubo-like figures, focused solely on her exposing her labia by lifting her skirt. Lubell traced this gesture through many different cultures and epochs dating from prehistoric times, and concluded that exposure of the labia was indicative of the worship of female sexual, procreative power. This author

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also felt that Medusa represented a degradation of Baubo and of feminine sexual power under later male influence.

That the image of a decapitated female body (with or without a head drawn on it) is enduring is further indicated by its persistence into modern times. The surrealist artist Magritte painted *Le Viol (The Rape)*, which depicts a woman's torso as a head on a neck with long hair where the neck should be, the breasts as eyes, the umbilicus as nose, and the groin and external female genitalia as a bearded mouth.

Nor has the fantasy of the decapitated woman been expressed only in the visual arts. For example, Benjamin Franklin (1745) advised a young friend to take an older woman as a mistress and to cover her head with a basket during intercourse. Franklin explained that, with her head covered, it was impossible to tell an old woman from a young one. Franklin's fantasy of symbolic decapitation of women continues to be verbalized by American men who say of women whom they find unattractive, "I'll just put a flag over her face and head-fuck for Old Glory."

Clinical Material

The ending of an analytic session has meanings for all patients. It is most meaningful for those in whom issues of abandonment, loneliness, and separation are particularly acute. These meanings are often expressed behaviorally rather than verbally. Some patients fall silent at the end of sessions; others speak more rapidly. Some get off the analytic couch slowly, while others do so with great rapidity.

If and when these behaviors become the focus of direct analytic attention, some patients will speak of feeling "cut off or castrated." I have had three patients who said they felt "decapitated." That was how decapitation entered into the analysis of a man, Mr. L, whom I saw five times a week. He persistently fell silent at the ends of sessions. After seven months of treatment, this pattern was called to his attention. In reflecting on it, he said he would rather end the session himself than be "cut off When you end the sessions, it feels like you are cutting my head off or castrating me. It feels as if you are treating me like a woman, someone whose words are unimportant and don't matter." There was then a long silence followed by the barely audible words: "Like I was a dumb cunt."

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Mr. L had been born and raised in a rural area, the fourth of nine children and the first male child in a white, fundamentalist Christian family. At the time of his birth, his oldest sister was seven and a half, and the sister born immediately before him was eighteen months old. He was two when another sister followed him and eleven when his last sibling was born. The last four children were all boys. His mother had therefore been pregnant and delivered a child nine times in nineteen years. Each delivery took place at home with a midwife in attendance. The family was poor and the house was small. Often there were two or more to a room and sometimes to a bed. Under these conditions, the patient was repetitively exposed to the sight of his mother's abdomen swollen with yet another child; her breast-feeding his younger siblings; his sisters' breasts, pubic hair, and menstruation; and his brothers' genitals and masturbatory activity. The sounds he was exposed to included those of his parents' sexual activity and those of his mother during childbirth.

Arrayed against the plethora of stimuli and the temptations, fantasies, and conflicts they stimulated were his parents' preoccupations with hellfire and damnation as punishment for what they considered sexual sins. Their church had itinerant preachers, and sometimes Mr. L's father took that role. In contrast to the bodily exposure the patient experienced at home, his father and the church preached extreme modesty in dress. This was taken to such an extent that the boys on the basketball team in the "Christian" school he attended wore long pants rather than shorts.

As he recalled this childhood milieu, Mr. L's deep underlying sense of sadness, fears of abandonment, and longings for closeness and praise emerged more clearly in the transference. Seeds of these feelings were present in our very first meeting. When I went into my waiting room that first time, I found him standing and staring at two antique illustrated Indian Hindu manuscripts that hang on one wall. It is relevant to note that he is the only patient in the thirty-six years that they have hung there who ever did this. He even began that first session by saying, "Those are curious paintings. Are they Persian? Or Indian? Or Tibetan?"

While at the time I noted his behavior, I did not fully appreciate its meanings or significance. I thought to myself that Mr. L's interest in the manuscripts was a displacement of his curiosity about the analyst—the

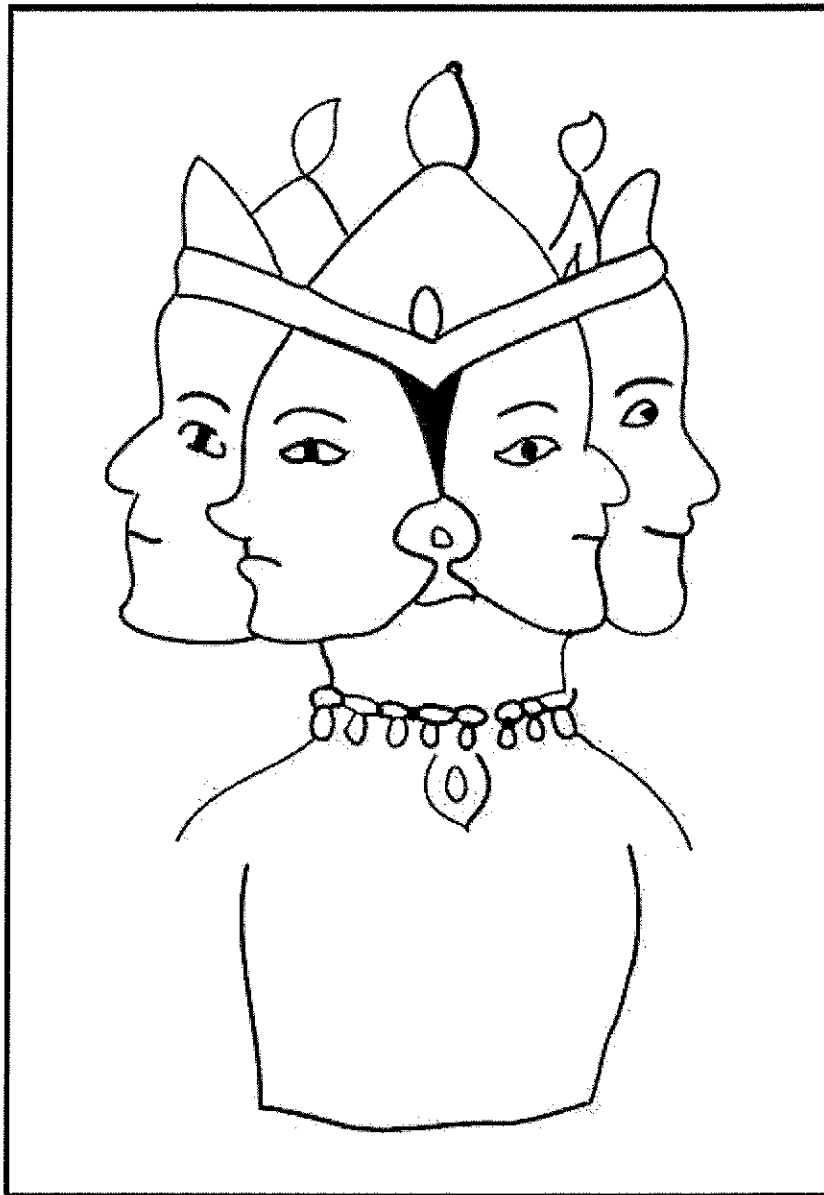
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stranger whom he was about to meet—and his anxiety that I would be too distant, foreign, or strange to understand or help him. While these first speculations proved valid, they were not the entire story.

Both paintings contain figures with unusual heads. In one, the Hindu god Brahma, the creator and progenitor of all mankind, is depicted with four heads (see **Figure 1** below). In the other, the god Ganesa, the creator and remover of obstacles, is shown. Ganesa has a portly man's body and an elephant's head. At that time, I had no reason to suspect that these particular images would be of special interest to this patient, nor did the patient consciously know why he was so interested in them. As indicated by his initial questions, he had no knowledge of or familiarity with Hindu religion or art.

Figure 1: The Hindu God Brahma (drawing by Eugene Halpert)



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However, six months into the analysis, Mr. L became preoccupied with these images hanging in my waiting room. He did some research and correctly identified the figures with the strange heads. He did not stop at that, but continued to read about Indian art and religion and to visit museums that displayed such art.

Simultaneously, Mr. L began to express ever more open hostility toward women. Since coming to the New York City area, he had lived in a world very different from the one he had grown up in. He had given up the religious beliefs and practices of his childhood. His New York world was one of the sophisticated, educated, financially elite. In this world, he had had multiple brief sexual experiences, but no emotionally meaningful relationships with women. In the session after he told me that when I ended a session, he felt as if I had dismissed him as a “dumb cunt,” he spoke of a woman whom he had had intercourse with. He said, “I can't tell one woman from the other—they are a blur, as if they all had the same face. But I can't tell you what that face looks like. They even all sound the same: dumb. They just chatter on as if they didn't have a brain in their head. But who cares? All I think of is what they have down below and getting into it.”

Analysis of these misogynistic feelings revealed a decapitation fantasy. Since all women's faces and heads were the same and could not be described, it was as if they did not have a head. A series of memories, fantasies, and feelings were condensed in this image. The most easily accessible of these were memories of his father's preaching that women were weaker, less intelligent beings who existed only to serve men's needs. His father would invoke scripture to support these

ideas by saying that Eve had been brought into the world from a useless part of Adam.

The patient had readily taken in this contemptuous attitude toward women. As a longed-for son, he had been overly valued by his parents, while his sisters had been devalued. In essence, the unconscious, shared belief was that if you have a penis, you are worth something, and if you don't you are not. This was, via displacement upward, one contribution to Mr. L's fantasy of the decapitated woman.

However, hidden behind his demeaning, dismissive, angry attitude toward women was a longing for closeness to an idealized mother. In time, this longing became manifest in the transference. When the patient

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first saw the two framed manuscript pages, he thought (correctly) that such strange images must be of interest to me. My awareness of my heightened curiosity about this man who came from such a different background than my own (city-bred and Jewish) and any of the other patients I was seeing at that time alerted me to my vulnerability to his attempts to secure the undivided, loving maternal care and attention that he yearned for by appealing to my interest in the strange and foreign.

The idea that I was interested in and accepting of strange things was reassuring to Mr. L, since he felt he was strange and came from a strange background. He unconsciously fantasized that if he learned about those images, he would thereby show me how smart and knowledgeable he was, and he would become my favorite and ultimately my only patient. In this way, he imagined he would undo the feelings he had experienced with the births of his four younger brothers—feelings of abandonment and loss of status as the only son. This narcissistic mortification contributed to his rage at his mother for her reproductive capacities and at his siblings for existing. This display of knowledge to the analyst would also, he unconsciously felt, fulfill his wish to be that powerful, creative, and desired mother whom all envied. His feelings that women were “dumb” and “empty-headed,” and that “nothing important comes out of their mouths,” were displacements upward of his envious wishes expressed via reversal. These feelings also expressed his wish to empty his mother's womb and dismissively destroy his siblings.

These wishes emerged from the analysis of extra-analytic as well as analytic transferences. At his workplace, the patient had climbed the ladder of power and responsibility by defeating a series of competitors in a very large organization. His associations to these competitions, as well as to his ambition to defeat all his competitors and become the head of the organization, led back to his unconscious childhood wishes.

For example, in one session several years into the analysis, Mr. L said:

My family was big like the company, and I had to work hard to get noticed. The babies could wail and get noticed, held, and fed. My mother decided who got taken care of. It made me furious when I was too old to wail, but I tried to pretend I didn't care. I felt like smashing them all, my brothers and sisters. And

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my mother, too—not only for bringing them into the world in the first place, but for having the power to decide who got responded to. Often not me. I was talking to my oldest sister recently, and she told me that, when I was three and a half and Ma was noticeably pregnant again, I ran into her belly on two or three occasions. At this point in my life, I've smashed a lot of people, and I have the power to decide who gets what for a lot of people.

As noted above, similarly, Mr. L unconsciously wished to eliminate all my other patients, and in so doing to become my “only child.” This was evidenced early on by the derogatory and belittling comments he made about the patients who came before and after him. His early transference to me as an idealized, creative person upon whom he lavished praise and admiration reflected his early childhood awe of his mother's procreative abilities. His competitive envy of these abilities expressed itself in the transference as an element in his curiosity about the figures on the wall of the waiting room and his research into them and the Hindu religion. He would make comments such as “I'm learning about this stuff and maybe someday I'll know as much as you do about it.”

Further along in the treatment, these comments were more along the lines of “Maybe I now know as much as you do, and someday maybe I'll even know *more* than you.” His competition and identification with me reflected his unconscious, early, conflicted, frightening competition and identification with his mother and her power to create. The castration anxiety accompanying this feminine identification led to his disparagement, denigration, and “decapitation” of women.

One way this emerged in the transference was in Mr. L's reflections on my name, which occurred several years into the analysis. The first time he spoke of my name, he said, “I don't know if I ever mentioned it before, but when Dr. X referred me to you, he called you ‘Gene.’ I wondered whether it was *Gene* or *Jean*—whether you were a man or a woman—and I asked

him. I only wanted to see a man I wonder how often you were teased as a child. You know, by being called 'Jeanie.'" He also wondered whether "other patients" might have teased me about my name. The analysis of these projections and displacements of his own

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feminine identifications, envy, and sadism played a prominent role in the treatment.

In addition to this unconscious identification with his mother, the patient had sexual longings for her. These longings emerged most clearly in memories of his oldest sister, who had begun caring for him when he was two and she was ten. Though he had told me of his research on the figures in the manuscript pages as soon as he had discovered their identity, he did not report what else he had learned about them or his reaction to his new knowledge until more than eighteen months later. At that time, he accurately recounted how both Brahma and Ganesa had gotten their unusual heads, saying:

They each had a head cut off. Brahma, who created all people and everything in the universe, originally had five heads. He sprouted them so that he could always watch his first creation, a goddess whom he lusted after. He had created her out of loneliness and longing by splitting himself in two. To help Brahma control his passions, Shiva wrenched off one of his heads.

The story about Ganesa struck me as similar [the patient continued]. The goddess Parvati became very lonely when her husband Shiva was away for a very long time. Out of her loneliness, she created a son to protect her and to keep her company. She rubbed oil on her skin, and out of the material of the rubbing, she created Ganesa. She made him the guardian of her bath and told him not to let anyone in. While standing guard, he occasionally peeked at her. When Shiva finally came home, Ganesa refused to let him in to see his wife. Shiva became enraged and, not knowing that he was Parvati's son, decapitated him. Parvati was overcome with grief and rage and said that, unless Shiva gave him a new head, she would destroy the universe. Shiva told his servants to bring him the head of the first creature they saw, which turned out to be an elephant. Shiva put the elephant's head on Ganesa's body, revived him, and then adopted him.

The meanings of these stories for Mr. L became clearer over the next several months. He noted that in them the wish for a child arose out of feelings of loneliness, and that sexual intercourse did not play a

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role in the creation of the child. As he related this, he recalled his own loneliness as a child. He said:

It might seem strange that I could feel lonely since there were so many of us. But you know, I think we were all lonely to some degree because it wasn't ever possible to just have one special person to yourself. My mother was always worn out and preoccupied with the one who was most recently born. Sometimes I'd watch her with the baby, whatever baby it was, and envy the baby and sometimes even my mother. If she got lonely, she could always have another baby and have that special close relationship to it. Even Ginny [the sister who took care of him¹] had interests other than me. By the time I was twelve, she was out of the house, married and pregnant. If I were a man like Brahma, I could have created my own child and could have had that special kind of relationship. [In fact, Mr. L felt that he had been like Brahma and Ganesa in some ways.]

I think they show Brahma with four or five heads, each pointing in a different direction,² because we are all curious and want to see everything. He, being a god, could do that. He could always have his eye on whomever he desired. That was me with Ginny: always swiveling my head around to catch her in the bath—like Ganesa, I guess. Or with her boyfriend, or getting dressed or undressed. When I was real little, maybe four or five, she used to take me into the bath with her. I always looked even though I knew I wasn't supposed to. And thought of touching her and doing other things. I knew it was sinful and that I was going straight to hell. Later on, I would pretend to myself that she wasn't my sister so that it wouldn't be so bad looking at her body. [Laughter.] Maybe I was expecting Shiva in the form of my father to come and cut my head off for having such thoughts!—or my balls.

In the context of these associations, Mr. L's inability to remember or recognize the faces of the women he had sex with was interpreted as a

¹ This sister's name, Ginny, was similar enough to mine, Gene, that it became one of the bridges over which the patient's transference traveled—especially his transference to me as the longed-for mother/sister who would cherish, appreciate, and care for him above all else.

² See Figure 1, p. 475.

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way of decapitating them. This both expressed and avoided his guilt and fear of castration for his incestuous desires for his sister/mother. Whenever he saw a woman's face, he would imagine seeing her body, in effect blanking out her face or conflating it with her genitals.

As this work proceeded, the patient began one Monday session by reporting that he had once again visited the Asian collection at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. In it he had seen a small stone figure of a naked woman that he had not noticed before (see Figure 2 on the following page). He said:

There she was. Sitting or lying there, I couldn't be sure which, with her legs spread wide apart so you could see her crack. But she didn't have a head. It wasn't broken off, because instead of a head, she had a lotus flower. The sign said "Lotus-Headed Fertility Goddess. India. Seventh Century." It didn't give her a name. On the one hand, she is showing you—I mean me, or whoever looks at her—everything she has between her legs, but is hiding her head. That is, a flower has replaced her head. What is ordinarily hidden is shown and what is ordinarily seen is hidden. I knew you would wonder what it meant to me. I wondered myself. I know some of it has to do with what I've been talking about: wanting to see my sister—to see between her legs, to get between her legs. Am I really saying this stuff? Do I believe it? Do I expect Shiva or you to rip my head off? I am beginning to believe that I really do blank out women's heads and faces, because to recognize them and have feelings for them would be like seeing my sister and desiring her.

When he spoke of the lotus-headed figure in a later session, I asked Mr. L if he was aware that he had not said anything about her being a fertility figure. He responded with two interrelated trains of thought. One was: "Whenever I don't say something but keep it to myself, and you say something like you just did, I wonder if you said it to really help me know myself, or because you are just curious and get some kind of pleasure out of trying to see inside my head. Or is it both?" The other train of thought was: "Fertility figure? My mother?"

Over time, the exploration of these two interrelated thoughts led to his admiration and envy of me for what he saw as my "creative and

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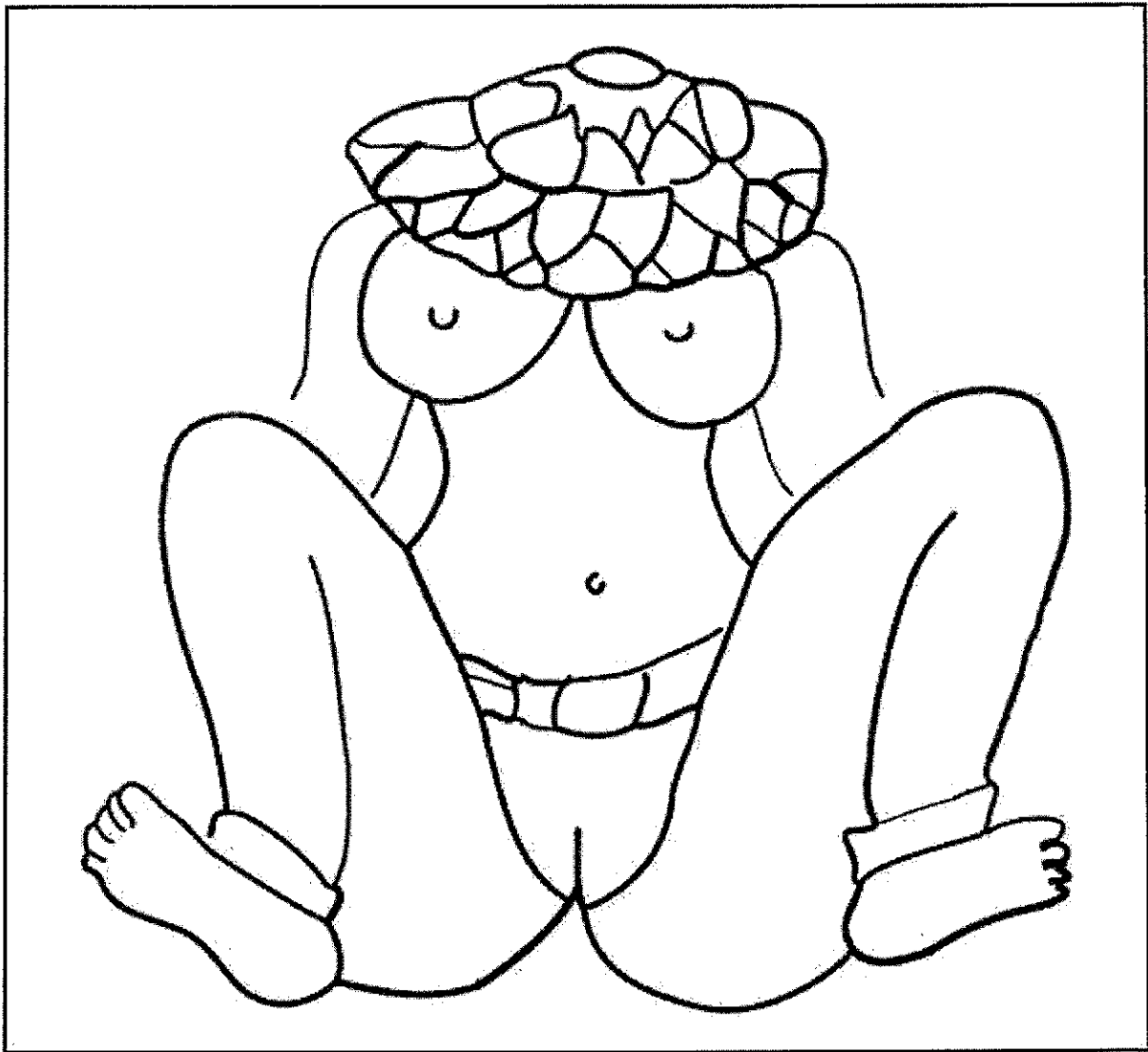
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open mind your receptivity to ideas and the ideas you come up with." Mr. L had projected and reversed these feelings in the transference. In doing so, he had unconsciously assumed the role of the creative mother/woman giving birth to admirable ideas/babies, and cast me in the role of the curious, awestruck child trying to look inside his sister's/mother's head/body to learn the secret of her creativity.

The Indian Goddess Lajja Gauri

Art historian Bolon (1992) provided the following description of the lotus-headed goddess, most often called Lajja Gauri (depicted in Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: The Goddess Lajja Gauri (drawing by Eugene Halpert)



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Striking images of a certain Indian goddess have been variously referred to as “The shameless woman,” “the nude squatting goddess,” or, because her historical name remains unknown, by more than twenty-five names The best-known images of this goddess have a female torso and a lotus flower in place of a head, while her legs are bent up at the knees and drawn up on each side into a pose that has been described as “giving birth” or “self display” [p. 1]

Lajja Gauri is almost always made to lie on her back, supine. The toes of the recumbent figure are tensely splayed as if she is in the act of giving birth, yet there is no indication of pregnancy. Some scholars have concluded, however, that the goddess is simply indecent, shameless, and that the pose indicates sexual receptiveness. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, although some do give birth miraculously, Indian goddesses are never pregnant in imagery or myth. The pose of Lajja Gauri is ambiguous, but probably intentionally so since the pose of sexual receptivity and the pose of giving birth are the same. The human form and the intercourse/birth pose are used as a metaphor for creation, [p. 5]

This spread-leg pose is called the *uttanapad* pose in Sanskrit. Bolon noted, “The word *uttanapad* exactly explains this image. In Rg Veda it is said that the earth sprang from the Uttanapad, the Creative Agency or Productive Power. Uttanapad in Sanskrit means ‘one whose legs are extended in parturition’” (p. 6).

Bolon concluded:

The essential nature of this goddess is not as Universal Mother, Divine Mother, Personified Womb, or Mother Goddess, although she encompasses all these. More properly she is the essential source of all life, animal

and plant, and thereby the source of all Fortune. She personifies the sap of life, which in Indian philosophy is considered to be the vivifying element embodied in water, the support of all life. That she is creative power personified is apparent from the symbols employed in her form and their deep cultural and artistic significance, [p. 6]

Among those symbols, the lotus is most prominent. It is the sacred flower of India, symbolizing fortune, fertility, and reproduction. As such, it is found in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain art.

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Quoting Bolon again:

The lotus floats upon the water, as it was conceived by Indian mythologists, the earth floats upon the waters and thereby the lotus is also a symbol of the earth, source of all life and fortune The lotus symbolizes, thereby, both the potency of life-giving water and the earth, [p. 52]

Discussion

While one may question some of the meanings offered by Bolon of the iconography of Lajja Gauri, the degree of agreement between this art historian's examination of the spread-legged, lotus-headed figure of the goddess and my patient's associations is striking. Both saw the goddess as basically the most creative, generative figure imaginable.

In addition, Mr. L's associations indicated that the figure's decapitation and replacement of her head with a lotus flower might originate in several interlocking conflicts and fantasies. One of these is the displacement upward of castration anxiety. While in the Medusa image, snakes replace the absent penis, in the image of Lajja Gauri, a long-stemmed flower replaces it. The lotus head may also both represent and defend against incestuous desires. The patient had in effect unconsciously decapitated women and made their individual faces "a blur," lest he see his sister/mother in his mind's eye; it is the same with the lotus-headed figure of the goddess, since one lotus head looks like another.

Furthermore, when Mr. L found a woman's face attractive, he undressed her in his mind and imagined her genitals. The same idea is represented in the Lajja Gauri image by both the lotus head (the lotus and flowers in general are common symbols of the female genitals and generation) and the open view of the external genitalia. The most striking features of the goddess, visually, are her legs spread apart to reveal her genital slit and the absence of her head, which is replaced by a lotus. This represents and emphasizes the unconscious equation of one with the other.

The hostility expressed in the decapitation of women derives from the unconscious awe and envy of the creative power of women. While that awe and destructive envy were unusually intense in this patient

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whose mother had given birth nine times in nineteen years, it is universal. **Horney (1926)** noted the universality of this awe and envy when she wrote:

But from the biological point of view woman has in motherhood, or the capacity for motherhood, a quite indisputable and by no means negligible physiological superiority. This is most clearly reflected in the unconscious of the male psyche in the boy's intense envy of motherhood. We are familiar with this envy as such but it has hardly received due consideration as a dynamic factor. [p. 330]

Chasseguet-Smirgel (1976) wrote along much the same lines. For example:

Freud attributed to man a "natural scorn" for women. This scorn originated in the lack of a penis. My experience has shown me that underlying this scorn one always finds a powerful maternal imago, envied and terrifying The need to detach oneself from the primal omnipotent mother by denying her faculties, her organs and her specifically feminine features, and by investing in the father, seems to be a need in which both sexes share, [pp. 283-284]

Seelig (2002) reviewed the Greek myth in which Zeus swallowed the goddess Métis, who was pregnant with his child, because of the prophecy that the child would be very powerful. Seelig stated, "In this sequence, male fear and envy of women's procreative powers leads to incorporative and aggressive action" (p. 899).

We are aware that the wish to be and have everything is part of infantile narcissism. When an infantile wish is denied—be it the wish to have a penis, to be able to have a baby, or for anything else—rage is inevitable. Since this is as true of the female as the male, and a little girl cannot become pregnant or give birth any more than a little boy can, one wonders about her feelings and thoughts in this regard. The figure of the Indian goddess Lajja Gauri suggests that women

also unconsciously decapitate women. She is, after all, a fertility goddess who is prayed to by female worshippers when they wish to become pregnant.

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Balsam (1996) drew attention to the neglect in the psychoanalytic literature of the effect on the little girl of her pregnant mother's body image, and stressed the importance of the changing size and shape of the mother's body on the little girl's gender identity. It should be noted that the case of the male patient presented here indicates that the changes in the pregnant mother's body have no less important effects on the psyche of the male child. How the effect of the mother's bodily changes during pregnancy is the same or differs in children of either gender, and/or of different ages, awaits further psychoanalytic material and observation.

Does a Hindu woman praying to a decapitated goddess to grant her a pregnancy unconsciously think of the goddess and of herself only as a generative vessel whose power to create shows in her face and her head as much as in her genitals? How much would such a woman's feelings about her mother's fertility and creative power be similar to, and how would they be different from, those of a man? Would any woman anywhere, wanting to become pregnant and fearful that she might not be able to, unconsciously create images similar to those worshipped by followers of Lajja Gauri? Answers to these questions, once again, await further analytic material and exploration.

It has frequently been observed that men often undress women with their eyes. What has not been appreciated is how often such undressing may express an unconscious decapitation fantasy. Nor has it usually been understood that these decapitation fantasies may form an unconscious element in societal contempt for and prejudice against women. Many persons, particularly in light of recent world events, may think only of fundamentalist Muslim societies as practicing symbolic decapitation of women via veiling and the denial of voting privileges, education, and the ability to work outside the home. However, as some scholars have demonstrated, it is far more widespread (though often not as blatant) than that.

For example, **D'Angelo (1995)** wrote:

For early Christian men, as it seems for men in antiquity in general, women's heads were indeed sexual members, and at least two of these men, Paul [the apostle] and Tertullian [a third-century ecclesiastic] expended much thought and no little ink to enforce the sexual character of women's heads, [p. 131]

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To illustrate this assertion, she quotes from Paul's sermon to the Corinthians as recorded in 1 Corinthians in the New Testament of the Holy Bible.

11:3, But I want you to know that the head of everyman is Christ, the man the head of woman and God the head of Christ.

11:4, Every man praying or prophesying with his head covered shames his head.

11:5, But every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered shames her head; for it is one and the same thing with a shaven woman.

11:6, For if a woman does not cover herself, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaven then let her be covered, [quoted by D'Angelo 1995, p. 132]

In short, as D'Angelo noted, Paul argued for the veiling of women, or shaving their heads, because in his mind a bare-headed woman was sexually exposing herself and her husband. His belief that women cannot think and need a man to do so for them was another expression of decapitation: in effect, he thought of them as headless. A little further on in 1 Corinthians, Paul, like my patient Mr. L, expressed the wish to deny women their creativity and appropriate it for men:

11:8, For a man is not from woman, but woman from man.

11:9, And man was not created on account of the woman, but woman on account of the man.

While D'Angelo made the same observation—"Paul's use of the Genesis texts not only removes the woman's ability to act as head, but also robs her of her role as a source of life" (1995, p. 134)—she did not attempt to provide motivation for his need to deny women's creative capacity. I suggest that the Genesis story of the derivation of Eve from Adam that Paul relies on—a prime creation myth of Western civilization—contains within it the same unconscious male envy of women's creative abilities, and appropriation of them, that Mr. L demonstrated. It also suggests an emotional link between loneliness and creativity: Eve was created as a solution to Adam's loneliness, just as Mr. L wished that he could give birth like his mother did so that he would never be lonely, just as Brahma and Parvati gave birth as a solution to their loneliness.

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Suffice it to say that Tertullian, in a third-century tract entitled "On the Veiling of Virgins," was even more explicit and virulent about the symbolic decapitation of women, openly expressing the upward displacement of the female genital to the head: "Impose a veil extrinsically on her who has a covering internally. Let her whose lower parts are not bare have her upper parts likewise covered" (Tertullian quoted by D'Angelo, p. 146). Tertullian also stressed the erotization of looking as a reason for veiling: "Such eyes wish a virgin to be seen as has a virgin who wishes to be seen. The same sorts of eyes mutually desire each other. It is of the same lust to be seen as to see" (quoted by D'Angelo, p. 145).

Conclusion

Having explored the image of the decapitated woman as it arose in Mr. L's analysis, including his interest in the image of Lajja Gauri, and having noted how common this image is, I cannot but suggest that the fantasies condensed within it play a role in broader, shared unconscious fantasies that underlie various societal prejudices toward women. Some of these prejudices have been expressed in the history of Western society through the denial of women's capabilities in various creative fields, be they in the arts or sciences. Women have often been denied access to training or education in these fields. These prejudices may be understood as the expression of a shared unconscious wish to decapitate women by not recognizing them and enviously robbing them of their creativity.

Like my patient who could not distinguish one woman from another and hostilely felt that all of them were empty-headed, as an expression of his awe and envy of their ability to create life, to give birth, so males in general have often expressed the wish to deny women the capacity to create artistically, as their way of saying, "It is we who can create and give birth and not you." In so doing, society merely recapitulates the fantasy that Adam gave birth to Eve, a tale repeated by Paul to the Corinthians and by my patient Mr. L's father to Mr. L himself.

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