

## The Origin of Life: A Literary Comparison of Mythological Genesis with Clay

Ms. Meghna Ghatak

Assistant Professor, School of Humanities and Arts, Jagran Lakecity University, Bhopal (India)

(Author correspondence: meghna.phoenix.ghatak[at]gmail.com )

"Man and God met somewhere; both exclaimed, My Creator!"

- Unknown

Common people, thinkers and philosophers alike have all been curious about the origin of life as we know it. Ancient curiosity was met with mythological stories and superstitions as an explanation for simple scientific phenomenon. To cite an example, thunder accompanied by lightening is a simple scientific phenomenon that occurs all over the world between electrically charged clouds or cloud to ground. The flash of light is a discharge process for equalizing electricity between highly charged and moderately charged poles. However to understand this universal concept, research has had been carried out only after the advent of scientific equipments after the Renaissance. A Nigerian folktale used in oral literature tries to understand the phenomenon as a mother shouting on her pyromaniac son for inflicting damage and hence was banished to the sky. The son however still wrecks havoc there and at times distances himself from the mother, therefore one cannot hear the angry rebukes of mother thunder on all peals of lightening.

In the following paper, a few genesis stories from all over the world depicting creation of human or humanoid deities from clay have been compared from the perspective of mythological literature. Given the limitations of a research paper, only a few stories and their literary trail have been dealt with here. Let us begin with Ganesha, known as the God of beginnings and as the patron of arts and sciences in the Hindu pantheon. He is trans-religiously and trans- continentally considered to be mostly a humanoid deity modeled out of clay and brought to life in all the pre- Puranic and Puranic myths found about him in Indic literature.

'The name *Ganesh* is a combination of two words, *Gana* and *Isha*. *Gana* means all existing beings in names and forms, and *Isha* means lord. Thus *Ganesh* is the Lord of all existing beings, that is, of the creation... *Ganesh* is pictured as a short, pot-bellied figure with four arms and the head of an elephant bearing a single trunk. In three of his hands he holds a hatchet, a lasso and sometimes a conch. Sometimes the fourth hand is shown in a gesture of granting boons, but more often it holds a laddu...'

(Chiulli .M. Cristina Kalavati, Kali Annamaria Gabelli. 'Ganesh'. *The Gift 7: Ganesh: The Lord of Wisdom*. J.Amba Edizioni, 2000, Italy.pg 30 (web))

From the earliest artistic depictions there has been a

tendency to anthropomorphize the head by moving the eyes to the front and flattening the face while the eyes become human, sometimes complete with eyebrows.'

(Brown. Robert L. 'Introduction: Various Ganeśas' *Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God*. State University of New York Press, Albany. 1991 Pg 1-2 (web))

Various interpretations of Lord Ganesha's birth exist in puranic as well as local lore. The most popular of them can be found here.

'Though Shiva and Shakti are husband and wife, Shiva did not want to be a father. "I am a God. I will never grow old or die. Why do I need children?" But Shakti wanted a child, one who will help all creatures realize God. She decided to create one on her own. She anointed herself with turmeric and oil. When the mixture had soaked her sweat and dried on her skin, she scrapped it off and from the rubbings created a child, her son. She called him Vinayaka, a child created without (*vina*) the help of a man (*nayaka*) and ordered him to guard the gate of her cave and not let anyone in. Vinayaka, who had never seen Shiva, stopped everyone from entering his mother's cave, even Shiva. This infuriated Shiva so much he raised his trident and destroyed Vinayak's head. When Shakti learnt of this, she was inconsolable in her grief. "I want my son back," she demanded. To pacify her, Shiva placed the head of an elephant on Vinayaka's headless body and resurrected him. Shiva declared him to be Ganesha or Ganapati...'

(Pattanaik, Devdutt. 'Creation: From Vinayaka to Ganesha'. *99 Thoughts on Ganesha: Stories, Symbols and Rituals of India's beloved elephant-headed deity*. Jaico Publishing House. Mumbai 2012. Pg 3(web))

Another consideration is that of Diana, the warrior daughter of the mythical Amazon queen, Hippolyte who has been referred to as a demi-goddess in many cultural Greek-American myths. Amazons were a race of primarily female warriors that has been the subject of inter-continental controversy for far too long. While little and confusing archeological evidence has been found to prove their actual existence around Brazil and the river Amazon named after them, they have been rendered immortal in factual and cultural history of the world. Historians believe that warriors of both the genders of long haired Native American races must have fought their invaders evoking confusion regarding an egalitarian society.

Ancient writers felt that they lived separate from men,

were susceptible to sexual desires and did not want to change their lifestyle for anyone. They have also speculated that the Amazon men must have lead the life of househusbands while the society was administered by women or the women must have intermarried with the Scythian men and established a new society called 'Sauromatians' as the women of this new society were found with weapon in their graves. They were also assumed to mate with the bordering tribe of Gargarian men and kept only the female infants produced out of the union to live as Amazons where their right breasts were cut off or seared to give strength to the right shoulders and arms. This assumption explained the possible origin of the name as *amazon*, as the Greek word meant 'without a breast'.

'The Amazons were placed in a variety of geographical locations, and the one mentioned most frequently is the area bordering on the south-eastern shore of the Black Sea (in modern Turkey) around the city of Themiscyra and the Thermodon river... they were outside the "civilized" world inhabited by Greeks... the Amazon lived usually before or during the Trojan war, and thus at least 500 years before the first mention of them in the Greek literature. At least as far back as the fifth century B.C, the story circulated that the Greek hero Heracles (known to the Romans as Hercules) was given the task of bringing back to Greece the girdle of the Amazon queen Hippolyta. To achieve this, he and his followers fought a battle against the women warriors during which Heracles kills Hippolyta and took the girdle from her dead body.'

(Salisbury. Joyce E.'Amazons: Ancient Warrior Women'. *Encyclopedia of Women in the Ancient World*. ABC-CLIO. Santa Barbara, California, 2001. Pg 7 (Web))

William Moulton Marston, a 43-year old psychologist from Harvard University and co-inventor of the lie detector test created the ideology of 'Suprema the Wonder Woman' later shortened to only 'Wonder Woman'. She is the first female superhero in a male dominated comic book series by DC Comics, Inc., an American comic book publisher. She was re-launched by the company in 1987 after her portrayal as an anti-men lesbian severely hit her reputation and symbol.

'Wonder Woman's origin story began in All Star Comics #8 in December 1941 when an American fighter pilot, Steve Trevor, crash-landed onto Paradise Island, the home of the mythical Amazons. Thousands of years earlier, the Amazons had been imprisoned by Hercules in his quest to accomplish his famous twelve labors...After the Amazons escaped from Hercules, they quit the aggressive, violent world of men and were led by Aphrodite to a hidden island where only women would reside. Once there, Queen Hippolyte sculpted a baby daughter out of clay who was given life by the gods, and she was named her Diana.'

(Hanley. Tim. 'The Utopian Alternative: William Moulton Marston and the Origins of Wonder Women', *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*. Chicago Review Press, USA. 2014 Pg 14 (Web))

There have been multiple stories of humans being made

from clay by the potter who is none other than the supreme God in many religions and cultures. The early Christian Yahwist tradition compares god to a potter and a glass blower which were some of the most ancient occupations known to man besides fishing,

"God takes water and clay and fashions the mud into the form of a man, as a potter would shape clay into a vase... Pygmalion-like, God falls in love with His clay mold and blows into the nostrils of the clay mold the breath of life."

(Fr. Shamon, Albert Joseph Mary.'The Creation of Man and Woman (Genesis2): The Creation of Man according to the Yahwist Tradition (around 950 B.C)' *Genesis: The Book of Origins*. Riehle Foundation, Milford, USA, Pg 11-12 (Web))

That God was and is ever merciful and that he begun the cycle of evolution to not to display his ability to attain perfection but to bestow his blessing upon them is a celebrated fact in most religions and cultures. His love for his creation has been compared to the Greek-Phoenician myth of Pygmalion where he falls in love with a female statue he carves. Pygmalion had worked hard day and night according to the myth to craft a flawless beauty and upon falling in love with her; he had said repeated prayers for her to be able to love him back. In some version, the statue comes to life and loves her creator, Pygmalion back. The biblical origin story is both similar as well as dissimilar to the Greek myth of Prometheus creating man as seen in the following extract:

"...we find the following succinct summary within the mythographer Apollodorus' (c.186-120 BC) collection of Greek mythic traditions:

Prometheus molded men from water and earth and gave them also fire, hiding it in a fennel stalk. But when Zeus learned of it, he ordered Hephaestus to nail his body to Mount Caucasus (this is a Scythian mountain). On it Prometheus was nailed and bound for many years. Each day an eagle swooped on him and ate the lobes of his liver, which grew back each night. And Prometheus paid this penalty for the theft of fire until Hercules released him later..."

(Dougherty, Carol. 'Introducing Prometheus: Who is Prometheus?' *Prometheus*. Routledge, London. Pg 5(Web))

Prometheus here has no expectations out of his created children who are mere mortals just as the Chinese Goddess of creation, Nü Wa had none. While Prometheus was given the task to create humans, Nü Wa had simply wished to populate Earth. Grecian mythical history remembers Prometheus mostly as the trickster titan who was punished severely for endeavoring to refine human civilization by Zeus. Western classical mythology commemorates him as the champion of human striving, the quest for scientific knowledge and as the genius whose mission to enhance human existence leads to tragedy.

"A tablet discovered in the ruins of the city of Ashur and dating back to approximately 800 B.C gives us still another version of the creation of man...On this tablet mention is made

for the first time in Babylonian-Assyrian literature of the first two human beings and their names, Ulligarra and Zalagarra. Before each one's name is placed the sign for "deity", which means that the first ancestors of mankind were regarded as being divine at least to some degree. The reason for this conception lies, of course, in the fact that they were thought to have been created with divine blood, which, according to other sources, was mixed with clay."

(Heidel, Alexander. 'Related Babylonian Creation Stories: Another Account of the Creation of Man'. *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of the Creation*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. 1951 Pg 68 (Web))

Ulligarra and Zalagarra, the first humans created out of clay according to the Babylonian-Assyrian literature have a higher stature than Adam and Eve as Adam and Eve are simply the ancestors of the modern man and woman but Ulligarra and Zalagarra were considered holy. Hence Ulligarra and Zalagarra were as holy as Ganesha or the Amazon princess, Diana.

### Conclusion

Soil, dust or clay are all considered the skin of the planet we live on. The more fertile the soil is, the more sustainable and durable it is for all the species. It has an incredible property of being molded into a variety of materials according to use such as when tiled, it gives us crops; when baked into bricks, it gives us shelter. Pottery was the seat of cultural development and the first hunter-gatherers must have found strength in the art of producing ceramic cookware, hardware. Hence clay must have been chosen as the material for our supposed manufacture in the mythological stories pertaining to creation stories. Earth, the very seat of clay, the building material is considered to be mother, the harbinger and hence considered sacred.

The soil from the river deltas have been found to be the most fertile as the most ancient civilizations have been found to have settled around them. A 5<sup>th</sup> century stone carving of Lord Vishnu incarnated as a half boar-half man superhuman, lifting the Earth goddess, Bhumi/Bhudevi out of the water; situated on the banks of Betwa river in Udaigiri cave system in

India narrates a very prominent story of creation. This ancient mythical story where the Lord takes a leaf out of the life of a common boar whose sole occupation is to dig for edibles in the swamps; and uplifts the submerged islands full of human habitation on His tusk is basically a metaphorical comparison of the continental drift. The Native American Algonquian tribes replace the boar with a turtle who brings out the underwater fertile soil for creation. The ancient story teller here had simply explained how the first soil for creation had arrived when we weren't surrounded by scientific equipments to test the reliability and validity of whether life on Earth is native or alien.

The fact that soil precedes human existence has been established in all the mythical stories around the world, not just soil but also the planet as we know it with all its living creatures. Scientists today agree that the Hominidae family consisting of apes and the first man appeared around 15-20 million years ago while the Earth was formed 4.54 billion years ago and the first undisputed evidence of life on earth was found around 3.5 billion years ago. The first man Adam according to Bible and Quran is synonymous to mankind and has been created from *Adamah* which when translated from Hebrew means 'earth' or 'red clay'. This Earth is seen as feminine and the Biblical Genesis chapter makes it clear that man and earth live in a state of eternal symbiosis as the produce from the Earth on which man is dependent will only grow when he tills it. In the same way, Hellenic and Indic traditions of the worship of a plethora of gods and goddesses stem from the system of co-existence, they appease the gods with their first produce and the gods bless them with more produces.

In a nutshell, since clay is important to produce food when seeds are laid in it, clay is important to cook the harvest when pottery is produced out of it; hence it must have attained a mother status. God, the father figure makes humans in his image as seen in Bible, Quran and many Hellenic and Indic sources so that they can carry forward the process of creation just like He had done. If the creator is a female as in Shakti, Nü Wa or Queen Hippolyte then She is seen as a mother birthing children where the body is made of clay which needs to go back into the clay to complete the symbiosis.

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