

## The Veiled Goddess

We stood there, my friend Loles and I, shoes in hand, gazing over a sea of red. We must have looked as befuddled as we felt because a gray-haired man in dark slacks and a colorless checkered shirt stepped toward us and, silently, with barely a nod of his head, gestured to a small, raised area, enclosed by a six-foot tall wooden lattice that was open enough to peer through, but, what with its location in the back of the mosque, private and hidden enough not to be noticed. We followed his gesture and, once inside, we felt more like prisoners than women “called” to worship.

We had begun our journey barefoot, at the entry of a mosque in Istanbul, a city, like that of Turkey itself, that bridges the exotic Arab lands of the East with the Western world. We stood, feeling shamed as humiliated captives (I was reminded of Chinese women binding their feet and how that crippled their autonomy and Western images of the “ideal” woman as one who was both “barefoot and pregnant”), while before us, over a hundred men knelt on bright red carpets, their foreheads bent to the floor, facing the *imam*, whose words called out in a surreal cadence, echoing beneath the domed ceiling. Only the two of us represented the “fairer sex.” In Islam, men are called to prayer five times a day, but women don’t have the same duty. In silence we watched, unsettled by our segregation, scarves covering our feminine and “sexually alluring” hair. The lattice interfered with the view, which was no doubt intentional, as if being in a corner behind massive stone pillars hadn’t already made the separation between woman and god quite concrete.

I had made this long journey to the land of the great mother goddess, Kybele, who was later known as Artemis when Anatolia became part of the Hellenistic Empire, because I wanted to touch her, to walk the land she vitalized, to adore her and seek her blessings. I wanted a first-hand experience of the marvel that has drawn pilgrims to this land for millennia. And I wanted to experience the Moslem world, to try to understand how this land whose people once worshiped a Great Mother could now have so completely abandoned her — and all things feminine.

Muted light slanted through long windows behind where we stood. I wanted to cry, but silent screams of outrage held back the tears. In this world where men are everything

and women are something less, the great mother goddess is no longer recognized, which was disturbing, to say the least, with all this divinely inspired beauty surrounding me. Ornate designs in deep browns, oranges, and reds in the patterns so beloved by the Moslem world enlivened the arches and swirled around the windows, adding vibrancy to the whitewashed walls. Suspended from the ceiling a huge chandelier delineated the men's prayer area. Stained glass windows that allowed for only filtered light to ooze through and the high, domed ceiling leant the entire mosque a womb-like feel, not so unlike the great medieval churches of Europe. The only things missing were pews and the crucifix over the altar. When the segregation had gotten to be enough, I nudged Loles and we left, hoping to slip out unnoticed.

Outside the mosque, in the surrounding courtyard, was a group of women. Ah, I thought, this is where they gather rather than experiencing the second-class status they would within the walls. Every one of them wore a long, drab coat even though we were on the verge of spring, their head covered by a scarf in a decorative pattern, though in the same somber colors. The women's eyes were expressionless, as if bearing the burden of their gender for so many centuries had left them fatigued. They chatted easily with each other, apparently content to allow their men to perform their duty to God as they performed theirs to each other. They smiled, sometimes even laughing over, no doubt, some domestic incident, as I had seen my mother and the women of her generation, those confined to that claustrophobic sphere of domesticity, so often do. Their smiles, though, were heavy, reminding me of the ones I had seen years ago on women living under the weighty authority of the Soviet Union. And I thought of Adrienne Rich's poem, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers." In it, Aunt Jennifer sits beneath a tapestry of proud tigers prancing "in sleek chivalric certainty ... [t]he massive weight of Uncle's wedding band/Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand."

One younger woman sat alone on a low, stone wall. In her open hands she held the Koran; her lips moved slightly as she read from it, her body rocking slowly back and forth, back and forth, as if responding to a silent rhythm, one perhaps that throbbed in her soul. My eyes began to burn, then they brimmed with tears. Tears that soon warmed my cheeks with tiny rivers. I cried. For her, for the others, for all women

who have been told that they, by virtue of their gender, are not enough. Not smart enough, not strong enough, not wise enough, not worthy enough. And I am not one to cry easily. I am the one who rises in outrage rather than tears at images of injustice and the horrors the world can bring upon itself. But perhaps because I was confronted with the women, with their acceptance of their second-class, unworthy status, and I was one of *them*, that my eyes burned. I was sure my cheeks were red, stinging with a secret shame. This was not the way I envisioned my pilgrimage to the land that once venerated Kybele, who, flanked by her lions, was the giver of life to the land, the creatures upon it, and to us humans as well. How could this goddess, this bearer of life be reduced to shuffling along, eyes cast to the ground before her, arm in arm with another woman, her femininity cloaked? Once so beloved by her people, where was Kybele now? How could she remain, so silently stoic, while men usurped her place?

What I really wanted to visit, having been teased by its massive dome — all earthy orange and radiant — that is suddenly visible when you near, is Hagia Sofia, originally a Christian church first erected in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, but victim of subsequent burning. It was rebuilt in more or less its present form during the 6<sup>th</sup> century when it was dedicated to Sofia, the Greek goddess who embodied spiritual wisdom. Her totem was the dove. As the Greeks began to embrace Christianity, they could not forget their goddesses. Goddesses they had long adored, such as Artemis, one of the earliest nurturers and mistress of bird and beast, or Athena, whose intellect and loving care helped so many Greek warriors — especially poor Odysseus on his long journey home. Aphrodite, whose beauty promised the awakening of love. Or Isis, who originated in Egypt, but was worshiped in Greece through the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and was the quintessence of life-giving when she resurrected her husband after his death. Though Osiris never returned to a full life, he bore enough vitality to impregnate Isis with their child, the beloved Horus.

When Christianity finally usurped the earlier religions, Sofia was assimilated as the genderless dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit. During the 4<sup>th</sup> century, these Christians, who until then had been a loose bunch with varying ideas on what it meant to be a follower of Christ, were finally defined — with rules to follow and creeds to swear by — within the new Church doctrine and the Virgin Mary came

to embody the mothering qualities of these earlier goddesses, most notably Isis. Indeed, it is an image of Isis, cradling Horus in her lap, that led to later renderings of Mary clutching the swaddled Jesus.

Hagia Sofia is most closely linked to Artemis through a massive pillar reaching from floor to ceiling that was brought here from the Artemision near today's city of Ephesus. The Artemision was one of the Seven Wonders of the World and it seems only fitting that, as the old religion that worshipped Artemis was replaced by Christianity, one of Artemis' temple pillars should literally, as well as spiritually, lend support to this new religion. The metaphor is not lost, nor is Artemis' grace, which was bequeathed by Christians to Mary, the mother of Jesus, just as Artemis, in her original conception as Kybele, was the divine mother of us all. It's no coincidence that Catholics envision the Church as "Mother Church."

The next day we left Istanbul to make our way along the coast of the Aegean. En route, we passed Mt. Ida; from its peak one can see the island of Lesbos, which reminded me of the remarkable poetry of Sappho and how, she, too, lay forgotten for so long. She once wrote,

Like the very gods in my sight is he who  
sits where he can look in your eyes, who listens  
close to you, to hear the soft voice, its sweetness  
murmur in love and

laughter, all for him.\*

Such words remind us of the wonder of love. Today, though, we don't linger to allow Sappho's life and poetry to take root, as we are eager to make our way to Ephesus.

Before arriving in Ephesus, we stopped to visit the most meticulously rendered statue of Artemis in the museum at Selcuk. A secret smile just touches her lips; her chest is covered with soft, rounded breasts, suggesting her ability to nurture us all. The heads and front legs of animals adorn her body, flowing down her gown. Bees sit in orderly lines down the sides of her dress, so vibrant they almost buzz. The broken bodies of four-legged beasts stand beside her statue, reminiscent of statues of Kybele who was enthroned with lions flanking her. Artemis' arms reach out to us, while images of small bull heads fall from her head in an elaborate headdress.

And then we reached Ephesus, the city of the Great Mother, who was known by many names throughout not only the Mediterranean, but also Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Greece. In the Phrygian language, she was Kybele (Cybele in her Latinized form). Later, Kybele was assimilated into the Greek pantheon as Artemis with Ephesus the city dedicated to her beneficence. The name Ephesus may have derived from *Apasas*, which was the name of a city in the Kingdom of Arzawa, which translates as “City of the Mother Goddess.”

Ephesus was rewarding at first sight: when I entered the city and was greeted by a relief of a smiling Nike, the goddess of victory, that once stood at the gate of Heracles. Its placement today at the entrance to Ephesus is an appropriate invitation.

For such an ancient city, Ephesus is impressively intact. I strolled down the main street, which was paved with stone. Intricate mosaics make up the sidewalks in front of what were once thriving businesses. The gymnasium was dedicated to Artemis; in addition to her other aspects, she also embodied qualities the Greeks and Romans so admired in the human body — one honed to an illustrious image of strength and beauty. A Women’s Gymnasium once contained several statues of young women, evidence that even females were invited to partake of both physical training and education when Artemis embodied the divine.

During the early years of Christianity, St. Paul came to Ephesus, hoping to convert those who worshiped the great goddess to a worship of Jesus and the monotheism of Christianity. However, the story goes that he was stoned and driven from the city amidst cries of, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Other stories claim that St. John escorted the Virgin Mary to Ephesus. Some believe it was in Ephesus that John wrote his gospel and where Mary lived out the remaining years of her life.

Artemis was great and powerful, nature in its most intimate and unrelenting form. As the Great Mother, Artemis was recognized as the earth itself, fertile and able to bear new life every spring. Artemis was also mistress of the beasts that inhabited both field and forest and, in a wonderful story of her first act as a nurturer, even helped her mother give birth to her twin, Apollo, just minutes after her own arrival in this world.

Christianity never really abandoned her; she was simply renamed the Virgin Mary as Mary does, indeed, bear many of Artemis' traits. Mary is the nurturing mother, never bereft of food or the gifts of the spirit, always with an ear open to hear those who call on her, ready to grant their requests for comfort and security. What has been stripped from Mary is her aspect as nurturer of the land, not honored as she who brought abundance to the land, ensuring the crops would continue to grow in their seasons, ever turning the wheel from life to death and to rebirth. Only Artemis' name has been forgotten, which must be the inspiration for the enigmatic smile on Nike's face.

Farther along, the Temple of Hadrian includes a relief of Athena, goddess of wisdom, and another of Artemis. The wall framing the back of the temple is adorned with an image of Medusa, one of the gorgons whose gaze would turn a man to stone. This made me smile. Here, at least, was a woman who held her own against men. A statue of Aphrodite adorns a fountain that once spouted water in a cascade of glistening droplets, reminding us of Aphrodite's birth from the foam of the sea. Her eyes soft and wide, her head tilted just so; maybe she too wonders where the reverence for love and beauty has gone.

Surrounded by all these images of women, each powerful in their own right and collectively portraying every attribute to be desired, one question kept pounding in my head: What happened? How did these traits once recognized as inherent in a woman and essential to survival both practical and spiritual, become those to be admonished, hidden, usurped by her male counterparts? Was it that, as men came to power in the Church they feared both the power innate in the female as well as their inability to control both it and the reverence the populace gave it? Perhaps.

The Prytaneion was a place reserved exclusively to worship Artemis. An altar within includes a statue of Hestia, goddess of the hearth and home, while in the garden, Athena oversees the bounty of the earth where the eternal (maybe not so *eternal* after all, though the hope remains) flame burned, in honor of the eternal life of the city, protected day and night by these powerful goddesses.

I sat on the rough ground to contemplate these ideas of the female. I also thought about my own nature as a woman and what that means to me, both personally and in view of cultural ideas of gender. What if these goddesses were

venerated today? What if one could choose a temple to Artemis as easily as one could enter a church or a synagogue? Would there be fewer rapes? Or battered women? Would a woman sit in the White House as leader of the land? How different the world would be. For women. For men.

In the Agora, where politics were debated, are the remains of the foundation of a temple from the 1<sup>st</sup> century dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis. She was the original “mother of god,” having given birth to the divine child, Horus. Statues of her holding the tiny infant on her lap, suckling him at her breast, were the inspiration for later images of the Virgin coddling her own divine child. Isis was not only mother extraordinaire, but also she who resurrected her husband-brother, Osiris. Like other goddesses of such great spiritual wisdom, Isis is frequently depicted with bird-like features, wings outspread, inviting anyone who sought comfort at her breast. To bring her husband back to life, at least long enough to conceive a child, she lay on him in her bird form, her wings embracing his lifeless one until he stirred with life once again.

As I let that thought turn around in my head, I couldn't quite grasp the magnitude of such an act of love. To bring someone back from the dead? Through the power of love? Not a literal death, of course. But a spiritual one. When we lose someone we love, they are never completely dead as long as they live in our hearts and our memory. As one becomes consumed with this temporal, material world, the spirit — along with its ability to perceive beauty and experience love — withers. We become dead, without heart or soul. If one could meditate on Isis' bestowing such love upon her husband, then there is hope for each of us to be resurrected by the love pouring as free as rain from the heart of the divine — or spewing from the fountain of Aphrodite, wafting from the feathers of Isis, or roaring from Kybele's lions. That Romans continued to worship Isis into their own era of gods and goddesses for another 300 years into Christianity speaks of the adulation she evoked.

A short distance from Ephesus is the ancient Artemision, or Temple of Artemis, and the site that I had been waiting for, anxious to see what had once been a monument to the glory of the goddess. On this day, under a china blue sky, tufted clouds like happy cherubs watched over us, dusty gravel twisting beneath my feet as I followed the steps many before me had traversed when Artemis' temple was revered as a

place of pilgrimage for those who sought her blessings; the church of St. John built later on the hill overlooking the Artemision became such a site for Christians, though I imagine the path was well-trodden by then.

The temple was originally built in 625 BCE, though it was rebuilt nine times altogether. One built around 550 BCE was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, which says a lot about the veneration of Artemis. The temple was destroyed by the Goths (those pesky invaders that also brought down the Roman Empire). What was left fell to ruin, its stone being quarried for use in other buildings, finding a new life, just like Artemis did through Mary, in churches such as Hagia Sofia.

Though the Artemision has long been abandoned and Artemis forgotten as a source of comfort and spiritual wisdom, she has not disappeared from the minds of those knowing that only the power of a great mother could give birth to all the life and magnificence of the world. Not far from her temple, overlooking the ancient city from the top of a small hill, is the house where legend has it that the Virgin Mary spent the final years of her life. It is tucked within a shady grove, a small cottage made of stone and wood, unassuming in its presence, but offering a view of the fertile plain below and the great span of heaven above. A stream trickles by, gentle as a mother's kiss. A statue of the Virgin welcomes with arms open in a posture so like that of Artemis it is clear Mary has assimilated those traits once attributed to Artemis. Though the multitude of breasts are gone, along with the beasts and bees, her dress flowing in soft, wave-like folds instead, there is no mistaking her invitation to grant solace. Instead of the towering crown of Artemis, Mary's is small, yet clearly symbolizes her status as "divine mother." Whether she actually lived here or not, no one can say with certainty, though the importance may lie in the simple desire to think it so. The presence of a great mother can surely sanctify a site, whether her name is Kybele, Sofia, Artemis, Isis, or Mary. The eternal mother can never be truly forgotten; she will always be reborn, with a new name perhaps, but one that resonates with the people to whom she belongs.

Can we find this great mother in a mosque, in the men's cold stares as women in Western clothes stroll along their streets? Could the breath of the divine so beloved by Moslems that it infuses their spiritual places actually be the

goddess whispering in the ears of those who will hear that she has not disappeared, but lives on, rising with the buds of spring, flourishing in the summer's crops, falling to the earth — her own tomb, her own womb — to rise once again in spring? Is it she who shyly strolls the streets of Istanbul, hidden behind the veil?

\* Richard Lattimore, ed. (1960)